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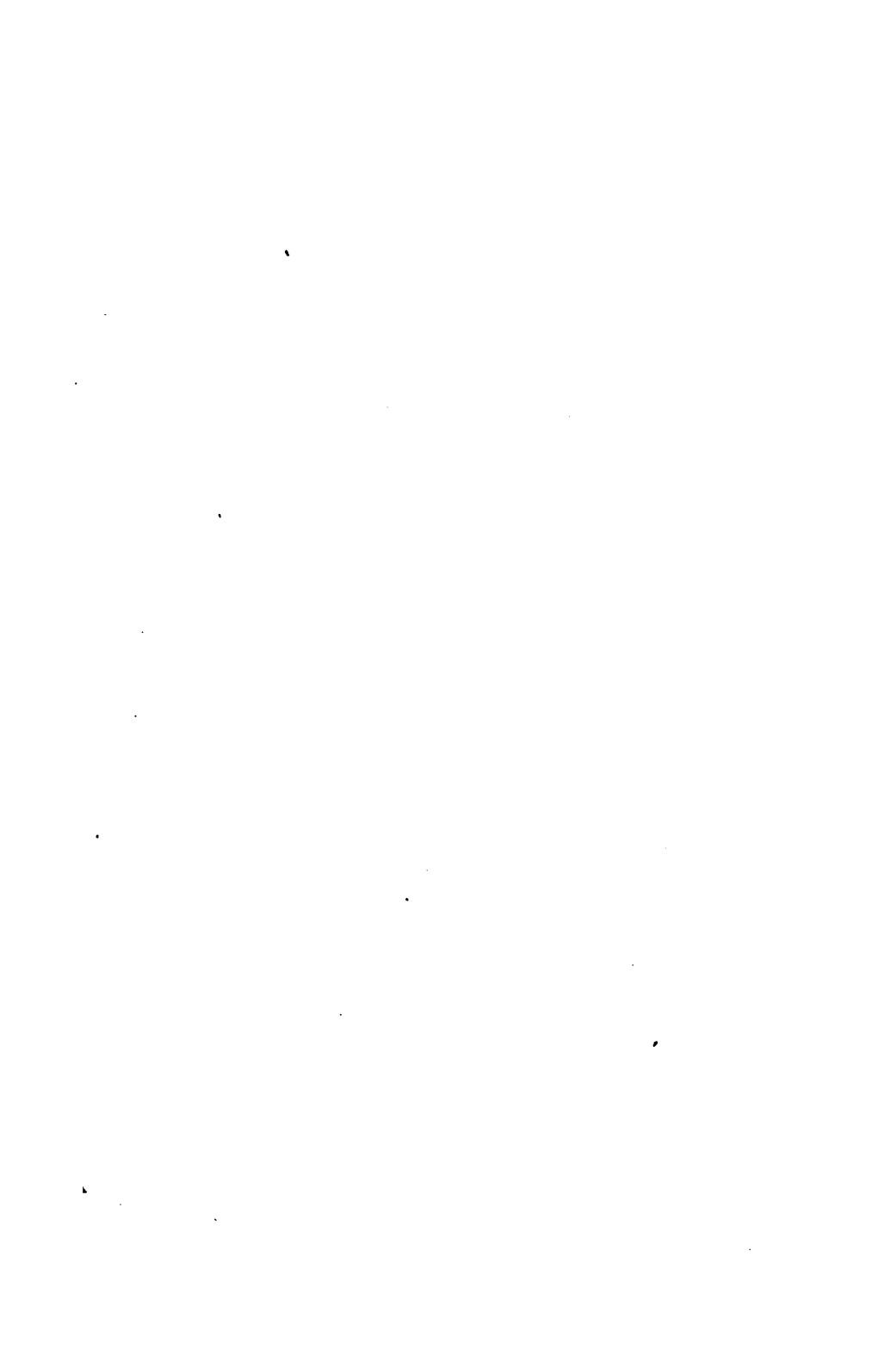
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BY L. ALLEN HARKER

ALLEGRA

CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS

JAN AND HER JOB

THE FFOLLIOTS OF REDMARLEY

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

MR. WYCHERLY'S WARDS

MASTER AND MAID

CONCERNING PAUL AND FIAMMETTA

A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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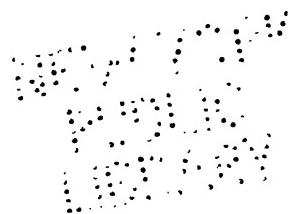
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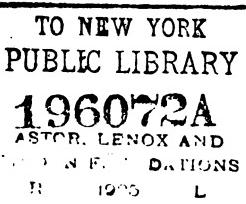
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NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1920

M. G. H.



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WILLIAM
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HAROLD
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TO

MAJOR A. W. ALLEN HARKER, R.G.A.

Midst war's alarms I sent it you to see:
Between us, like thrown shuttle, to and fro
The weaving of the story used to go,
In ravaged Flanders—you; in London—me.

You did not find it dull, or slow,
“Send me some more!” That was your constant plea
Midst war's alarms!

Thrice precious then your sympathy!
You cared to read—that caused my pen to flow;
You'd sometimes praise—how that made my heart glow!
Dear, but for you, no book had come to be
Midst war's alarms.

LONDON, October, 1918.

BOOK I

ALLEGRA

CHAPTER I

THE Black Lamb at Bitley is but a small inn, off the main road, and standing nearly a thousand feet above the sea on the summit of a wooded cliff. From its back garden you can see five counties spread out before you like a map, and old Irmine Street, like a stretched white ribbon, is laid along the valley, pointing towards Gloucester.

Bitley is four miles from a station and eight from the nearest golf course, yet the few visitors who have discovered it return thither again and again, for the view from the back garden of that inn draws like a magnet.

Dorcas Dancey, landlady of the Black Lamb, stood in the doorway of its one sitting-room, and beamed upon her guest, a young man, with very dusty boots, who sat at the round table eating cold beef and pickled walnuts.

Stout, rosy, and loquacious was Dorcas, and she appeared genuinely pleased that her guest was evidently hungry.

"I 'ope as you won't mind, sir," she said, "but we've took on a young lady as comes in by the day——"

"D'you mean to say you've started a bar-maid?" he interrupted incredulously.

Allegra

"Lawks! no, sir. There wouldn't be no custom for the likes of 'er. This is a young lady, sir, a real young lady. She don't sleep 'ere, but I've give 'er the little bedroom for 'er sitting-room to 'ave 'er meals in, an' she sleeps over at Mrs. Camm's. Mrs. Camm ain't no cook, an' small wonder, with that there grate. She've come for over the week-end—like yourself, sir, only longer——"

"I'd have come for longer if I could have managed it," the guest interrupted again.

"Thursday she did come, and bean't goin' back till Tuesday. You both did write the same day, but of course you comes first always with us, an' poor Simon needin' a change so bad and all. So Albert, 'e wrote as I couldn't 'ave her, but she wrote back that pitiful I upped an' said, if so be as she'd make shift to sleep at Mrs. Camm's, I'd do for 'er, and she taligraphed an' there was six-pence to pay."

"But this is most interesting," he exclaimed, as Dorcas paused for breath. "Tell me more, Dorcas. Who is she? And what's she doing in Bitley all by herself?"

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know what she've come *for*, unless it's for a change of hair. She've bin before, you know, with a hold gentleman. I think as I've mentioned 'im to you—but it's that long since you was down 'ere, I expects you've forgot."

"Where did they come from when they came together?" he asked.

"Oxford it were then, sir. I did see it on their

Allegra

labels. But this time she've come from right up North. Westingley it were. And she did say 'ow glad she was to get out of the smoke and grime. I've 'eard as the sun do never shine there, the smoke be that thick."

"What does she do with herself all day long?"

"Walks about, sir, and reads. Always a-readin', she be; always got a book; always a-studyin'. You never sees 'er with no fancy-work; not so much as a bit o' tattin'."

"A student, I expect," said the guest. "Lady Margaret or Somerville. I say, Dorcas, d'you think she'll be afraid of Simon?—or, worse still, will Simon object to her? You know his way of bouncing at people he doesn't like. He never does them any harm, but it's alarming. I do hope Simon won't take a dislike to her."

Dorcas Dancey moved to the window and looked out. It had been enlarged for the benefit of visitors, and opened to the ground.

"I shouldn't worry about that, sir, if I was you—from what I can see it don't look as if Simon had taken a dislike to 'er. . . . To be sure, 'e've just bin fed. You look, yourself, Mister Paul. Sure you've 'ad enough? Well, then, I'll fetch your puddin'. No puddin'? Only cheese? An' you that thin— But, there, you never was much of a one for puddin' not when you was so high. . . . Now the Captain—'e was always one for sweet things. D'rectly I've fetched your cheese I'll dish up 'er dinner; it's bin laid this 'alf-hour. She never takes no notice of time, she don't."

Dorcas bustled away and the young man she

Allegra

called "Mr. Paul" took her place at the open window, looking out on one of the finest views in a county famous for its scenery. But it was not the view that filled his eyes with almost incredulous amusement.

Seated on the grass, at the far edge of a level little lawn where the ground sloped steeply in shallow terraces till it met the wild woodland undergrowth, was a girl with her back to him; and close beside her, leaning his huge black bulk against one of her slender shoulders, a great Dane squatted on his haunches in evident and absolute content. Both had their backs to him, but Paul was familiar enough with Simple Simon's appearance to know exactly the expression of fatuous happiness that would overspread his amiable and foolish countenance.

The girl's bent head was beautifully shaped; with thick dark hair, blue in its shadows, luminous where the September sunshine made high lights upon the heavy coils. Paul decided that she possessed a most intriguing back, and stepped out of the window, whereupon he discovered that she was talking to Simon. Talking "even on," which partially accounted for Simon's ecstasy.

To be sure, he was used to it. His own master always talked to dogs as if they were intelligent humans. But Simon didn't often get it from strangers. It pained him more than a little that strangers were sometimes afraid of him; prejudiced against him, he supposed, because he was so big.

Very quietly Paul moved across the little lawn.

Allegra

The girl, busily talking, did not hear him, but Simon did; and, too polite to interrupt her conversation by moving, signified his pleasure in his master's approach by thumping the ground with his tail.

The girl's voice was musical, and she spoke very distinctly, though quite low.

"A charming voice," thought Paul.

"I knew we should be friends," she was saying; "the moment I saw you I knew we should be friends. No, you mustn't lick me; I don't like it, though I know you mean it kindly. And do you think you could sit up a little straighter? You're rather heavy and extremely hot. Oh, dear! I *am* so hungry—do you think your master's finished his lunch, and dare I ask Mrs. Dancey for mine?"

At that moment—for his master was just behind him—Simon arose abruptly and almost upset his companion as he did so.

The girl looked around, somewhat startled, slipped to her feet and stood looking up at him, for the lawn was on the first of the little terraces and the path on which she stood a couple of feet below them.

"Your lunch is ready," Paul announced cheerfully, while Simon stood on his hind legs and placed his paws on his master's shoulders in ecstatic welcome. "And has been for some time. I heard Dorcas say so, and came to tell you. . . ."

"Oh, I *am* glad," the girl exclaimed, and smiled up at him.

"I feel very guilty," he continued, "if my lunch

Allegra

has in any way delayed yours. All right, Simon. I'm quite aware you are here. Down, old boy." He just touched the dog's paws with his hands, and Simon dropped to the ground. "I hope he hasn't been a nuisance. May I help you up again?"

He held out his hands. She gave him one of hers—the other clasped a book—and stepped lightly up beside him.

A hand-bell tinkled in the distance.

"Lunch!" she exclaimed. "I must fly. Good-by, nice dog. . . . He's a most sympathetic audience," she said over her shoulder as she went. "He listens with such marked interest." She walked swiftly across the lawn and vanished into the house.

"She moves like a melody," said Paul to Simon, and stood with his back to the famous view.

But Simon, the great Dane, looked only at his master with soft adoring eyes.

Paul sat down at the edge of the lawn just where the girl had sat. Simon dropped to the path below and lay down at his feet.

"Now, who," said Paul to Simon, "would have expected to meet the Princess at the Black Lamb? For that's what she is, old chap. The Princess in a fairy-tale . . . it's always the animals discover 'em first, you know. . . . Only Princesses smile like that, and have such truthful backs, and are so entirely frank and unconscious of being looked at. Only Princesses speak so distinctly, and in such a pretty voice, and have eyes the colour of old dark sherry. It's interesting, very. I'm glad

Allegra

we came. How long will she take over her lunch? And do you think she'll come back here?"

For answer, Simon snored gently. The September sun was hot, and he had fallen fast asleep. Paul prodded him with his foot. "Get up, you lazy old brute, you; you're not to sleep. Here have I torn myself away from a week-end in glittering halls, 'with rugs and jugs and candle-light'—all to give you change of air and exercise, and you go to sleep. We are going to walk for fifteen minutes by my watch, right through the woods to the bottom of the hill. In one-quarter of an hour we'll turn back and come up again. We can't allow her less than half an hour for lunch, can we? I took less over mine—by Jove, I forgot the cheese, and nearly half a pint of good ale in my mug. Well, well, I can't go back for it now. Come on, Simon. We're here to take exercise."

Down the steep hill went man and dog, Simon crashing through the undergrowth and pretending to hunt for some imaginary game, till his nose was always adorned by a dead leaf or two and his great head wreathed in fluffy patches of 'Old man's beard.'

The beeches were already beginning to turn, though not yet had they donned their crimson robes. Heavy rain had fallen the week before, and in the disused quarry at the foot of the hill there was quite a deep pool of water. Simon drank thirstily, and Paul sat him down on a big boulder and cast a stone into the pool. He watched the spreading rings with interest for

Allegra

a minute, then looked at the watch on his wrist.

"Time's up, Simon; and now, you giddy old Bacchus, you, pull yourself together and find the Princess."

Simon, still crowned with clematis and a bunch of bryony berries right between his ears, looked fondly at his master and started straight up the hill again.

Paul followed more slowly. His thin brown face was thoughtful, his eyes—large, dark eyes with the long thick lashes that elderly women always say "are wasted on a man"—were interested and alert. Slim, spare, eager, with five and twenty good years behind him, and life in front, it would have been difficult to find in all the Cotswold country a happier person than Paul Staniland that afternoon. And half way up through the woods, when Simon had exchanged his spray of bryony for a neat tight piece of ground-ivy and a long scratch on his nose, they came upon the girl again, seated at the foot of a big beech-tree, her graceful head bent over a book.

CHAPTER II

SHE heard the footsteps on the dead leaves and broken twigs, and looked up, saw the garlanded Simon, and laughed.

"Please," said Paul, as he stood looking down at her, "may we stop and talk a bit? Or are you very busy?"

"Do I look busy?"

"You look very studious."

She closed her book. "You, on the contrary, look very idle."

Paul sat on the ground, facing her, and clasped his knees. Simon let himself down, with the complex double movement peculiar to big dogs, and laid his head on her lap. He tried to lick the scratch on his nose, and watched Paul out of the corners of his eyes.

"May we ask questions?" Paul demanded.

"Certainly; but I don't promise to answer them."

"Will you tell me what you do when you are not sitting under a beech-tree, studyin'—as Dorcas would put it?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. I'm a very busy person. I have got a profession."

"I thought as much—a learned profession, isn't it?"

"Well," said the girl, and paused doubtfully, "I'm not sure that it's called so. It ought to be,

Allegra

for it's difficult, and requires almost universal genius of a very rare kind; but I fear it isn't numbered among the learned professions."

"But surely . . ."

"What do you think my profession is?"

"—going to be? Perhaps you don't exactly practise it yet . . . but you're preparing . . ."

"But indeed I practise it. . . . You don't think I mean teaching, do you?"

"Well, perhaps lecturing, and enlightening the ignorant . . . later on."

"You aren't even warm . . . you couldn't have made a worse shot. You've not guessed your clump—now it's my turn. I think you write—but you don't make your living at it; you haven't got to—you're rather a *dilettante*—you don't work really hard."

"I do," he interrupted. "You wrong me, and you're not playing fair. Dorcas has been saying things—Now, hasn't she?"

The girl had removed the piece of ground-ivy from Simon's head, that she might stroke him with her other hand. Now she held up the bit of ivy and studied it closely, but she didn't stop stroking Simon.

"I really do seem to have heard a good deal about you, one way and another, Mr. Staniland. I could pass a fairly stiff examination as to your peculiarities when you were a little boy; your houses and lands, your horses and dogs, and everything that is yours."

"But none of them *are* mine except Simon and Mossy-face—he's my gee. But how awful to

Allegra

think Dorcas has been boring you like this! I'll have it out with Dorcas."

"Oh, you mustn't! That would be most unfair. I led her on—I liked to hear it. It was most . . . amusing."

"I've no doubt it was, and I'll tell you what—it is singularly unfair. Here have you gleaned all sorts of quite unreliable information about me, whereas I haven't so much as heard your name. I feel that Dorcas has presented me to you. . . . You know the sort of thing—'Princess, may I present to you Paul Staniland?'—and I am so overwhelmed by the honour, and she forgets to say Princess Who—they often do, you know. And presently I pluck up courage, and I say: 'Ma'am, will you tell me your Royal name?'"

"Have you ever spoken to a real princess?" she asked with interest.

"What do you mean by a real princess? Do you mean a fairy princess, or one of the Reigning House?"

"Of course I mean the real kind—that sit in the royal box at charity performances. I don't know anything about fairy princesses, except in pantomime. Have you spoken to a *real* one?"

"Never, nor the pantomime kind either, though I'd dearly like to. But the fairy ones—lots—happily; and, believe me, they're much the nicest, really. Hush! keep quite still a minute; here's a robin coming to speak to us."

She stopped stroking Simon and held her breath. A couple of yards away a robin hopped off a low holly bush and stood looking at the little group un-

Allegra

der the tree. Paul sat like a statue, but whistled a low, chirrupping stave. The robin stood with his head on one side, as if listening, flew straight to Paul's shoulder and perched there for about ten seconds, flew back to his bush, sang loudly for a minute, disappeared, and then all was silent in the wood.

"Now for the royal name," said Paul.

"I begin to think," said the girl, "that you are rather an uncanny person. How did you make the robin come to you like that? I've never met any one else that could do it."

"Oh, that's nothing; the robin's a friendly little beast, and not a bit shy. I've always lived in the country, you know, and got to know their ways."

"But what was the sound you made?" she persisted. "It was that fetched him."

"That was Mrs. Robin—a sort of password, you know—then he realised that I was a friend of the family; though if I'd made a sound like young Mr. Robin, he'd probably have pecked me—they're a very quarrelsome family directly the children grow up."

"Most families are, I've noticed," said the girl.

"Not the really nice ones," he rejoined. "But we're wandering from the point; I haven't been properly introduced yet, you know."

"My name," she said, and she watched his face as she made the announcement, "is Allegra Burford."

"A charming name—charming." But there

Allegra

was no recognition either in his admiring eyes or in his voice.

"You've never heard it before?" And the question had a disappointed ring.

"Never; but I'm quite certain that I shall hear it again in connection with the mysterious profession that you, so far, refuse to divulge."

"My real name is Stavrides—but they thought that was too foreign, so I took my mother's name."

"Ah, I'm beginning to get warm!"

"Do you happen ever to have been in Westingley?"

"Only passing through in the train, and it didn't look very attractive. Is it a nice place?"

"It's intelligent and in the movement—much more so than most provincial towns. Have you never heard of the Westingley Repertory Theatre?"

"Of course I have. Ah, I'm hot on the scent. Have you something to do with that?"

"I'm a member of the company—and I was vain enough to hope you might have heard of me. But perhaps you don't take much interest in the theatre?"

"Indeed I do. I hope to write for it some day. I know it's very ignorant of me not to know more about Westingley. Think—some day I might write a part for you."

"If you did that, and I liked the part . . . really saw myself in it . . . there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

She spoke eagerly, leaning forward, her cheeks a little flushed; her eyes, those clear, wine-dark

Allegra

eyes, regarding Paul as though they beheld a beatific vision rather than a spare young man with a clever, irregular face, clean shaven and mobile, with kind eyes that met hers with a gaze half-amused, half-admirative.

"Could you really do it?—and have you any influence?" she went on. "Do you know any of the people that back plays? Could you get any London manager to come and see me act? Oh, I do want my chance so badly! I've worked so hard, been through all the grind. Two and a half years touring, two years Repertory, and now I want to come to London. I'd understudy—anything, if I can only get seen there. I'm not going on at Westingley after Christmas. I've told Mr. Drake—though he wants me to stay on, and offered to raise my salary. I simply can't stick there any more—and now I've got a real chance, if only some one with influence could see me. The first week in November I'm to play Nora in *The Doll's House*. That's why I came down here, so as to be absolutely quiet and to realise her. I didn't care for her at first, not when I understudied her last year; she seemed to me shifty and weak and altogether tiresome. But now I see her side of it—I feel her temptations—I am Nora—and I want my chance."

She stopped, conscious that there was some subtle, intangible change in the mental atmosphere. Paul's eyes were still kind and admiring, but there was a difference. He still sat there facing her, his long arms round his knees, his hands loosely clasped; and he said nothing at all, evidently certain that she had not yet finished.

Allegra

"Probably you think it funny of me to say all this to you, a perfect stranger—probably you have not got to make your own way, or, if you have, it doesn't matter to you how long you take. But for me it matters so immensely much, and there is so little time. Do you realise I am nearly twenty-three?"

"Surely that's not very old. Why, I'm nearly twenty-six, and have done nothing at all. You, at all events, are ready for your chance when it comes."

His voice was deferent and courteous, kind even; but again Allegra felt that the mental temperature had dropped.

He was puzzled, puzzled and—in spite of his common sense, which pointed out that she was right and honest and straightforward—a little shocked. The people he knew best, if they had axes to grind, were careful to grind them out of public sight or hearing. This frank flaunting of the process under his very nose, on so singularly short an acquaintance, fairly put him out of countenance. He was athirst for life, life in its every phase. He drank deep draughts that fairly intoxicated him. He found people of every kind—the older they were the more he liked them—of entrancing interest. But deep down was the innate, unconscious conservatism of his class, especially where women were concerned; and it jarred upon him that this girl, whose serene aloofness had so attracted him, should suddenly wear her heart upon her sleeve with such effrontery. He saw the frank sincerity that underlay it, he realised the pathos, but it offended something

Allegra

in him that he could neither eradicate nor suppress.

She had laid her book on the grass beside her; an untidy, home-bound volume, thickly interleaved with written notes made from the "prompt copy" of the play. He picked it up and it fell open at the scene where Nora dances the tarantella. He could remember no time when the printed page did not hold him, and now the written page was even more irresistible. He began to read, forgot his momentary discomfort, forgot Allegra, and in twenty seconds was buried fathoms deep under the accumulated interest of the play.

Simon slept peacefully, and Allegra watched Paul. She did not interrupt him. She was not in the least offended that he had forgotten her. What she did think was—"If the mere reading of the play can hold him like that, what will it be when he sees me as Nora?"

That he would see her she had not the slightest doubt.

What she wondered was—would he be able in any way to further the end she had in view? Did he know any one in London likely to be of use to her? Could he be of use to her himself?

So pondered Allegra, with her clear gaze focussed on the irregular, thin, brown face so utterly unconscious of it. What lay behind that broad forehead crowned by thick, smooth brown hair? Hair much lighter than usually went with such dark eyes. She noticed his long eyelashes—how black they were. She realised the thin, sensitive throat,

Allegra

and longed to make it swell with the lump she knew she could raise by her pathos.

He was clever, she was sure of that; he was quick and sympathetic; he probably had quite unusual power, of sorts—but did he know influential people? To Allegra managers, “stars,” dramatic critics, and people possessed of money, who were ready to back plays, were the only influential people who really mattered. Could he be of USE? That was what she wanted to know, and determined to know before she was a day older.

But she did not interrupt him, and suddenly, as he turned a page, he looked up and saw her.

He shut the book hastily. “I beg your pardon. How dreadfully rude of me! First, to be reading at all when I might be talking with you, and secondly, to forget that it is your book and that you would probably infinitely prefer reading it yourself to talking with me.”

She smiled, a rather wavering, pathetic little smile, like watery sunshine. “I can find all sorts of excuses for you—but—Simon dear, I fear I must wake you. . . . Hasn’t it got a little cold?”

The sun was low in the heavens, the light athwart the beech-trees was brilliantly yellow, the air was chill. She wore a thin white blouse, and had no coat; Paul, in his thick tweed Norfolk jacket, suddenly felt a callous brute.

He caught at her hands and pulled her to her feet, regardless of Simon, who leapt aside in startled astonishment at the sudden earthquake under his head.

Allegra

“Come!” said Paul, still holding one of Allegra’s cold small hands. “We’ll run up the hill, and you’ll get warm. Then you must put on a coat, and we’ll have tea. I hope you will honour me by having it with me.”

CHAPTER III

PAUL lit the fire before tea, for the evening was chilly. Now they had finished and were sitting on either side of the hearth, while Simon lay right in the centre of the rug, his nose between his paws, blinking at the flames, and Simon recumbent took up a deal of room. Their armchairs were covered with that slippery horsehair that permits so precarious a hold upon the seat. Paul had already slid down in his, with his feet braced against Simon's back. Allegra sat forward in hers, holding out her pretty slender hands to the blaze. It was a wood-fire, crackling and hissing, with gay little dancing flames.

"This is what I thoroughly enjoy," she said, her bright eyes full of frank cordiality. "It's extravagant to have a fire in September, but it's not my fire, and I have no business here. I ought to be working. I have idled the whole afternoon, and am idling still—and, so far, don't feel a bit repentant."

"The exchange of ideas," Paul remarked sententiously, "cannot be called idling. I feel that I have learnt any amount. For one thing, I never before realised the importance of Nora's dance in *The Doll's House*; you have shown me that it really is of the very deepest significance—"

"Only if it is well done," she interrupted. "I wouldn't attempt it if I couldn't dance. I can.

Allegra

I have studied seriously. I have the natural aptitude, but without constant hard work that is of but little use. Without the daily practice that is so wearisome and tiring, no one can be really first-class; and you must begin young. At one time I thought I'd like to dance as my profession, but I don't agree with the people who maintain that every possible phase of emotion can be expressed in dancing."

"The ladies who proclaim that most loudly are generally the ones who galumph about the stage clad in skimpy wisps of some semi-transparent material, while the orchestra plays Debussy and coloured lights are thrown upon 'em."

"But," Allegra continued, as though she had not heard him, "I found that I wanted more than dancing could give me. I've kept it up, though, to a certain extent, and I really am good."

She spoke with the gravest conviction, quite impersonally as though she were discussing the capabilities of somebody else. Paul, who had slid so far down in his chair that he was almost out of it, suddenly sat up and looked at her with extreme curiosity.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

"Because you are so surprising."

"In what way surprising?"

"Well," said Paul slowly, "that's perhaps the wrong adjective. Shall we say—so Shawish?"

"Shawish because I say I'm good at a thing, when I know I am? He does that, I suppose, and he's quite right. It would be ridiculous affectation in me to say I 'danced a bit.' This after-

Allegra

noon 'you have told me you write 'a bit,' you ride 'a bit,' you play cricket 'a bit'—you own to doing nothing more than 'a bit.' Now, what am I to understand by that? Or is it only that you consider it bad form to say you excel in anything? Forgive me if I violate your code of good manners; you are a new type to me. I know it 'a bit,' but not well. . . . Will you tell me exactly what you mean when you say you write 'a bit'?"

Paul blushed. The graceful girl opposite to him, so composed and serene, had read his thoughts in the most disconcerting fashion. Her words might seem severe, but the voice in which they were spoken was full of charm and friendliness.

"You see, I'm only a beginner," he said humbly. "I hope to do good work some day, but I've everything to learn; and I'm very much afraid that I don't, as you put it, 'excel in anything.'"

At that moment Simon suddenly raised his head from his paws, evidently listening. There was a curious, uncertain fumbling sound at the door, as though somebody was trying ineffectually to turn the handle, and almost before Allegra had realised the sound, Paul and Simon were at the door, and it was open.

A baby, who had just discovered that he could get from place to place at his own sweet will, stood on the mat outside. He wore a butcher-blue linen frock and a very clean white pinafore; his hair had been brushed and fluffed out till it shone like floss silk the colour of a new sovereign.

Paul lifted him up in his arms. Simon, his tail

Allegra

going like a flail, snuffed delightedly at the little feet, and Paul carried the baby over to the fire and sat down.

"This gentleman," he explained to Allegra, "is Danny. But perhaps you know Danny already? He is a very special friend of mine."

"Bow-wow," said Danny, in a deep and solemn voice, pointing at Simon. "Bid bow-wow."

He had no eyes for Allegra when there was a "bid bow-wow" present, who endured, with the utmost patience, the vaguely directed slaps that were Danny's form of patting.

"Danny, my son," said Paul, "don't you see the young lady over there?"

"Bow-wow," repeated Danny, in even deeper tones than before. "Good bow-wow."

He certainly was a good bow-wow, for Danny was a lusty infant, and smacked Simon's devoted head really hard.

Danny's eyes were blue, large, and wondering; Danny's face was fresh as a May morning, and his body as rounded and sweet as a healthy baby's could be. He turned him round on Paul's knee, and, losing interest in Simon, demanded to "Bo."

Paul clutched his forehead in despair. "Danny, I haven't got it on—only a miserable wrist watch that won't open, not for a hurricane. Miss Burford, have you a watch that can do parlour-tricks?"

"Bo," Danny repeated with the utmost firmness, and made a dab at Paul's waistcoat.

"I've only a wrist watch, too," said Allegra. "What does he want?"

Allegra

"He blows, you know, and the watch opens; and this wretched watch won't. It doesn't even tick decently loud."

"Bo!" said Danny yet again, and this time there was a tone of surprised offence in his voice that this slave of his could be so unconscionably long in doing what he was told.

"Danny," said Paul persuasively, "it's a long time since I've seen your toes. Let's take your shoes and socks off, and you shall kick the shoes as far as ever they can go, and Simon shall fetch them."

In the excitement of this new game Danny forgot the miraculous watch, and showed his toes to Allegra, who actually left her chair to come and kneel by Danny and tell him "This little pig went to market."

And at the end of each recital Danny would echo "Market," which meant that he wanted it all over again.

Presently there came a rap at the door, and Dorcas, shrouded in a large flannel apron, appeared to bear her son away to bed.

"'E's grown, ain't 'e, miss?" she asked Allegra. "You'll see a difference on 'im since you was here last."

"I shouldn't have known him," said Allegra with the utmost truthfulness, for she had hitherto been only vaguely aware of Danny's existence.

"I knew as Mr. Paul'd want to see him before 'e went to bed—that's why I didn't stop un when I heard 'im run down the passage. I 'ope as 'e 'asn't bin troublesome?"

Allegra

Dorcas spoke much in the tone of hostesses in a higher social scale, who, expressing anxiety lest guests may have been "bored," are inwardly convinced that the said guests have been uncommonly well entertained.

"He has been affability itself," Paul assured her. "He's been so nice to us, we're both feeling rather stuck up—aren't we, Miss Burford?"

"Come to mother, darling," cooed Dorcas, holding out her arms persuasively.

But Danny was loth to go. He clung to Paul, and the corners of his mouth went down.

"P'raps if you was to bring him, sir—" Dorcas suggested weakly.

"No; he must go with you when you tell him. Listen, Danny: You go with mother, and Simon shall come too, and you shall wash his face—no soap, mind, for that would hurt him; just his face."

Danny went like a lamb, and so did Simon. Paul shut the door after them, and they heard a joyful voice reiterating "Wass Simon" till the kitchen door was shut, and there was no sound save the soft hiss of the fire.

Allegra had gone back to her chair. Paul took Simon's place on the rug, leaning against his.

"Will Simon really let him?" she asked.

"Simon will let anybody do any mortal thing to him if he cares for them. He's an awful ass, but the most devoted soul in the world."

"I wonder you can keep him in London. Isn't he a great anxiety? I shouldn't have thought you'd have wanted a dog there . . . anyway, such a big one."

Allegra

"I couldn't live without a dog," Paul said decidedly. "And, as to his being big, that's the very reason he can come to London. I wouldn't dare keep a little dog there, because of the motors and taxis and things; but even the direst road hog couldn't pretend he didn't see Simon, so he's pretty safe. They might just as well run over a donkey. But he never goes out by himself, of course; and I expect he's very good for me, as it forces me to walk miles to exercise him. D'you smoke?"

"Very rarely, because I don't think it's good for my throat. But I can—I had to learn how, in case I needed to do it in a part. I'll have one now, just before I go."

Again Paul had occasion to admire her pretty hands, as he gave her a light; again he was intensely conscious of her aloofness, her real distance from him, though they sat alone together in the firelit gloom of the September evening. It was as though she held before her a shield of shining friendliness that effectually parried any real advance to intimacy, and it roused in him an intense desire to get under her guard.

"Tell me, Miss Burford," he said. "Do you like being called a squirrel, a lark, a linnet, a little bird, and so on?"

"Do you mean me, Allegra, or 'Nora'?"

"Well, both of you."

"There's nothing I, personally, would loathe more—but when I'm Nora, you see, that's the dreadful sort of husband I've had for years, so of course I've got used to it."

Allegra

"He *was* a swab, wasn't he?"

"He's very real—just as she is, as they all are."

"Do you ever happen to have heard of a man called Dallas Flint in connection with the theatre?"

"Heard of him!" she repeated eagerly. "Of course I have. He's a very well-known man, most influential, pulls lots of strings; and, I suppose, knows more of theatrical law than anybody else. I've never met him, but you couldn't be connected with the theatre for long without hearing lots about him— Why? Do you know him?"

"He's an old friend of my father's. . . ."

"Is your father interested in the theatre? Would he back a play for you?"

Paul laughed. "I don't think you'd easily find a man of my father's age who knows and cares less about the theatre than he does. He goes to the play about twice a year, when he comes to London, enjoys it immensely, and is simple as a child in his interest; but it tires him dreadfully—he hates London." Paul laughed again, as at some recollection. "Father as a backer of plays is too quaint for anything."

"Yet he knows Mr. Flint."

"They were at Oxford together, and Mr. Flint has been kind to me. It happens that I'm dining with him on Monday night—that's what I've got to go back for. He thinks he can put me on to a job—do some work on a play, or something. He thought there might be fifty pounds in it, and I owe it to my father to make it if I can; he has been

Allegra

so awfully decent about letting me go to London and start on what I know he feels is a regular wild-goose chase."

"Tell me more about Mr. Flint—and do you know whose play you are to work on? Oh, how I wish Mr. Flint could see me as Nora!"

The shield was down. It was an unarmed, natural, and very eager girl who leant forward to gaze at Paul through the light wreaths of smoke.

"It might possibly be managed," he said thoughtfully. "Anyway, I'll come and see you, and then perhaps my enthusiasm might infect Mr. Flint."

"It might, but, you see, *The Doll's House* will only be on for three nights that week. It's a triple bill on the other three, and I've only a small part, in one of the pieces. I'm a peasant woman, and very tragic. It's a gloomy piece, written by a local poetess. I'm the wife, and my man is brought home——"

"And there's a grandmother," Paul interrupted, "who mops and mows and 'keens' in a corner; and the wind howls, and there's a fearful snow-storm, and the snow blows in when the door is opened—and they bring in the body—and it's called something tremendous like *The Mills of God* or *The Loom of Calamity*. . . ."

"Why, however did you know? Have you seen it?"

She looked quite innocently astonished, and Paul laughed.

"We have a local poet, where I come from. He writes plays in *vers libre*, and, oh, my goodness!"

Allegra

there's a jolly sight more *libre* than *vers*, but we all take him very seriously. Which will come first, do you think?—Ibsen or the local poet?"

"I'm afraid, Ibsen . . . and the beginning of the week is so bad for Londoners; they've only just got back from their week-ends."

"Is there anything to do in the daytime at Westingley, if one came for the week-end and stayed over Monday?"

"There's a very fine picture-gallery."

"Oh, come! one can't take exercise in a picture-gallery."

"But you couldn't bring Simon to Westingley——"

"You don't think he'd like it?"

"He'd simply hate it. No, there's positively nothing for you to do except come to the theatre. There may be a golf course, miles away, but I don't know. You see, I've never any time. . . . Must you have other amusements?"

She rose as she spoke, and stood looking down at Paul, serious and something wistful. "You see, the theatre is so much to me," she added. "Couldn't you make it enough for you, just for once?"

Paul, with none of Allegra's easy grace, scrambled to his feet.

"It will be everything," he declared. "I was only wondering how I could inveigle Mr. Flint into coming. Tell you what—I'll come first, as a sort of advance-guard; then I shall be so impressed and enchanted, I'll rush back and fetch him. Tell him he'll lose the chance of a lifetime if he doesn't come."

Allegra

"It's I who would do that, I fear," she said seriously; not in the least humbly. "But I believe it would be worth his while to see me. Now I must go. Mrs. Dancey will be coming to lay your dinner, and would be astonished to find me still here. Good night, and thank you for tea and the fire and everything."

"Don't you think we might as well have dinner together?" he asked as he held the door open for her. She had not offered to shake hands.

"No, that would never do. Good night."

Paul went over to the fire and threw more logs on it. He shivered as it struck him that perhaps Allegra had not ordered a fire in her little room up-stairs. Setting the window wider open, he went out. He heard a scuffle in the distant kitchen, a voice uplifted in protest, an opening door, and a black mass hurled itself into the deepening twilight and nearly knocked him down. Simon's effusive joy at seeing his master again after their brief separation somewhat comforted Paul, who was feeling snubbed and 'put in his place' when he had never sought to leave it.

Together they left the garden of the Black Lamb and strolled into the lane. The moon had risen cold and clear, and there was a good smell of frost in the air.

"Come on, Simon old boy," said Paul; "we'll have one more run before dinner, just to give us an appetite. Do you think she's cold in that horrid little room up-stairs, Simon?"

There was no fire in the little room up-stairs, but there was a solid smell of paraffin. The lamp

Allegra

was lit and turned rather low. The room was decidedly cold, and the blind flapped gently in the draught, for the window behind it was wide open.

Mrs. Dancey never shut a guest's window unless asked to do so. She was well versed in what she secretly called "the crotchets of the gentry." From the time she was fifteen till she left at thirty to marry Albert Dancey, she had lived in service with Paul's mother. Starting as nursery-maid, she had passed through the stages of schoolroom-maid, second housemaid, head housemaid, with occasional odd weeks in the kitchen, when the kitchen-maid had her holiday. It was not the view alone that brought visitors back to the Black Lamb. Its hostess was thoroughly well trained, and knew how things ought to be done. She had the good sense to attempt nothing elaborate, rather aiming at a perfectly ordered simplicity; and she expected, and even exacted, a certain standard of manners from her guests.

Allegra, studious and even mysterious in some respects, reached that standard in essentials: therefore did Dorcas refrain from shutting her windows, even though the evening was cold. But, unbidden, she was not going to lay or light a fire for Allegra. Paul was no criterion. He never shut windows, neither would he exist for a moment without a fire if it were in the least chilly. "Curus" he had always been as a small boy. He was still "curus" now that he was a man. He always would be "curus," but then he was one of her own young gentlemen, and so beyond criticism. He was the privileged exception—odd, fanciful, un-

Allegra

expected . . . and he adored Danny. Therefore could Paul do no wrong in the eyes of Dorcas.

And Albert was encouraged to saw up logs in his spare time, so that there might be plenty to burn when Paul came. "'E do love a bit o' fire so, and Simon be the same."

Allegra sniffed and shivered. She turned the lamp higher and pulled up the flapping blind. The narrow bed was pushed close against the wall and covered with a striped rug, to look as like a sofa as possible. The wash-stand served as a writing-table, and was strewed with little brown-paper-covered typewritten "parts." The dressing-table in the window was laid ready for a meal; one Windsor chair and a basket-chair—"the kind that whisper to you"—completed the furniture.

Allegra's coat was laid on the bed. She put it on, seated herself in the basket-chair, and shivered again. The window drew her, for she heard steps, and looking out saw Paul and Simon going up the road. She watched them for a minute, then drew down the blind and sat down in the basket-chair, determination in every gesture.

It whispered. It muttered. It almost whined that it was exceedingly cold. A Bee clock on the mantelpiece struck seven. The clocks at the Black Lamb were always fast. Dinner would not be till half past. A savoury smell of roasting game came up from below. Was that her dinner? Allegra wondered, or his? She did not take up one of the paper-covered parts to study, as she had intended. Instead, she crossed her arms tightly

Allegra

upon her chest and thrust her hands under her armpits to warm them.

It was almost impossible to dance or do exercises, there was no room.

"It's your own silly fault," wheezed the chair, creaking with ill-natured "told-you-so"-ness.

"He'd have taken Simon for his walk, anyway, and left you the fire, if you hadn't been so haughty and stand-off."

"A shilling a night for a fire," Allegra reflected sadly. She had not toured for two years without becoming thoroughly conversant with the cost of extras, and the Black Lamb was not cheap. She felt she had no right to afford a fire. Besides, would it be possible? There *was* a tiny grate, but at the present moment the wash-stand was right across it.

"I shall be warmer when I've had some of that awfully good smell," she whispered hopefully.

"Probably that's not *your* dinner," muttered the odious chair. "His dinner will be carried in first—you see."

"If there's one sort of young woman I despise more than another," the chair went on, "it's the sort that is always on the defensive: always suspecting innocent people of a desire to take liberties they never thought of—downright ill-bred, I call it."

This was unbearable. Allegra arose. "I'll go back to Mrs. Camm's and get a fur coat and a rug; then I shan't be so cold, and the little walk will warm me," she reflected. "It's no use sitting here thinking what an ass I've been."

Allegra

And just outside the Black Lamb she met Paul and Simon, returning from their walk. Of course they stopped and greeted her. She looked very white in the bright moonlight, and her voice trembled as she said: "I'm going back to get warmer things: it really is a very cold night, isn't it?"

"Haven't you got a fire? Oh, that's ridiculous. Dorcas! Dorcas!" shouted Paul, and as Dorcas appeared hastily in the lighted doorway: "Can't you put a fire in Miss Burford's room? She's perished with cold—look at her!"

"Well, to be sure," said Dorcas slowly, "I'm a bit doubtful about that there chimby. It ain't never '*ad*' a fire, not in my time, and it's likely as not there's a sack o' summat shove up it to keep the rain off the hearth. I'd be afraid to set a fire without Albert did poke up a broom or summat, and if there is anything, it'd make a deal of mess and a smother."

"Oh, please don't bother, Mrs. Dancey," Allegra cried eagerly. "Of course it's not intended for a sitting-room; it's very good of you to let me use it. I shan't be a bit cold when I've got something more on——"

"Now, look here, Dorcas, you must persuade Miss Burford to have dinner with me. It will be easier all round—I behave quite nicely . . . really . . ." he pleaded, turning to Allegra. "Do! It would be such fun."

Mrs. Dancey looked relieved. "If so be as you neither of you don't mind," she said, "it seems more conformable."

Allegra

"That's it," cried Paul. "We must be conformable, at all costs."

Simon looked from one to the other. He wanted to get back to the fire, and all this talk seemed to him beside the mark. He yawned widely, and stalked into the passage of the Black Lamb.

"Thank you very much," said Allegra primly. "I'll come back to dinner, with pleasure."

Paul did not offer to escort her. He followed Dorcas into the house, saying in a half whisper: "Is Danny asleep? Can I go and have a look at him?"

CHAPTER IV

ALLEGRA was not long, yet when she returned she had changed her frock, and wore a straight little dress of shimmering silver-grey, cut square at the neck, and round her slender throat was a string of old red-coral beads. A little bunch of bryony berries of exactly the same shade of red was tucked into the coils of her dark hair, under her left ear. Her quick walk through the chill September evening had flushed her cheeks; her eyes were bright, eager, and expectant, and Paul was immediately conscious that the shield was laid aside. The shining friendliness was there, but with a pleasant difference in its quality. It was less deliberate, less impersonal, and Allegra, herself, had somehow grown much younger. For the moment he forgot everything save that she was a pretty, pleasant girl with a musical voice, who was frankly enjoying her dinner.

She was a delightful and unexpected incident, and Paul basked in her agreeable presence much as Simon (in spite of commands to the contrary as often as his master noticed him) insisted on thrusting his nose as near the fire as possible.

Dorcas brought them excellent coffee, and again Allegra yielded to the temptation of a cigarette.

Again they sat on either side of the hearth in the slippery armchairs, with Simon stretched between them; and Allegra watched the blazing logs and opened out her hands to the warmth.

Allegra

Paul watched her, and curiosity awoke within him. In all his life he had never allowed diffidence to stand between him and the pursuit of any form of knowledge.

"We've had two meals together," he said. "There is the pleasing prospect that we may share two more, and as yet you haven't told me whether you like best to be called 'Miss Burford' or—your other name."

"Burford, I think. You see, hardly any one can pronounce my other name—it's Greek, you know. My father was a Greek."

"And Burford, if I'm not mistaken, is Gloucestershire?"

"Yes; my mother's people have been working folk in a village called Great Stanley for many generations."

"I've driven through Great Stanley. It's an awfully pretty village, isn't it?"

"I've never been there. I don't know much about my mother's people, except my aunt. . . . I suppose you think that very odd?"

She sat upright in her chair and looked at Paul, as though challenging him to find fault with her.

"How could I think it anything? I know none of the circumstances. . . . Only, you know, I'm so fond of Gloucestershire myself. . . . I can't imagine not wanting to know every bit of it."

"It's not snobbishness," she said—again with that little air of challenge. "I never pretend to be anything I'm not—but. . . . Oh, it's so difficult to explain. Truthfully now, would you take me for a peasant?"

Allegra

Paul laughed. "I should even question whether you could *act* a peasant very well."

"I could act anything, provided I hadn't to talk some dreadful dialect," Allegra replied, with considerable offence in her tone. "But unless you know the circumstances you can't judge me."

"*Judge* you! Who on earth wants to judge you?"

"I feel you're judging me, because—being of the Burford family—I haven't made a pilgrimage to my native village. Only, it isn't my native village. I was born in Athens."

"Well, then, Great Stanley has no claim. Were you brought up in Athens?"

"No, I don't remember Athens at all. My aunt brought me up—at least, she didn't. . . . Oh, it's very difficult to explain."

"Why explain? You are you, and that's enough for most people, I should think."

"For most people, yes: but you are a little different. I want you to understand, because I feel. . . . Oh, dear, it *is* so complicated. . . . Have you ever known any man whom you love and reverence so much that he is right away from everybody else—in a sort of sacred place all by himself, so that you can hardly bear to talk about him?"

Paul reddened and looked uncomfortable. "I think so . . . yes . . . one person."

Simon turned and looked at his master. He knew by the tone of his voice that Paul was moved in some way. Simon raised his big frame to a sitting posture and laid his head on Paul's knee.

Allegra

"Well, I had somebody like that," Allegra continued. "My aunt's master—she was a servant, you know—rather of Mrs. Dancey's type only much older . . . and he let me live with her in his house in Oxford and was endlessly good to me. He was a scholar and a great gentleman . . . and he loved me very much," she added simply.

"Wasn't he here once with you?"

"Yes, not long before he died . . . I don't wear mourning, because he hated it. . . . Till I was eighteen I lived with him in a sort of dream-world. Such a pretty world it was, and he was always so beautiful and kind and understanding. . . . And then I went on tour."

"But why?"

"Because I had to. It was my destiny. As you may imagine, I found the stage world was not the pretty place I had pictured it. Nor was it in the least the lurid place it is sometimes supposed to be. People work very hard and are kind and honest, or mean and jealous, according to their dispositions, just as they are in every other profession . . . and it's life. . . . I wouldn't live any other for the world. But it was very different. No one was in the least like him, and one side of me seemed shut up, somehow. He had made me unconsciously fastidious, and I was always on the defensive—I always am on the defensive till I'm very sure . . . it's the only way. . . . I was with you, till I went upstairs after tea and sat in my little room, and suddenly I realised . . . I needn't be—that you would understand . . . that bit of me. That's why I wanted you to know. I love

Allegra

my good aunt. He always called her my ‘good aunt’—and when I get on a bit I’ll have a little flat in London, and she’ll live with me. She thinks my profession rather dreadful, but she’s utterly loyal to me, and I’m very fond of her. You mustn’t think I know only actors. I knew other young men—your sort of young men—but naturally I haven’t met them much lately; and, you know, in Repertory there is so little time for anything outside the theatre. Seven shows a week, and always rehearsals for the next week—you get very one-sided. You can’t help it. My dear master—he was my master, too, you know, though he acted like the kindest guardian in the world—used to warn me against it; but it grows on one. It’s a little world apart, and the big world outside seems of no importance.”

“Did he come and see you act?”

“Yes, a few times; and they all adored him. He was so dear and funny and courteous, and distressed that we should have to wait so long at rehearsals. What you said about the Princess reminded me of him a little. He made everybody feel a princess, from the wardrobe-woman to the leading lady.”

“He has contrived to make you a princess, anyway.”

“No; I’m not, really, but he has helped me on the way to be an artist. I believe that. That is what I care about most. If I can achieve that, I’m willing to go without all the rest. I *would* like to earn enough to have a little flat and my own furniture. He left me some furniture—good old

Allegra

furniture. A tallboy with nice smoothly-sliding drawers. . . . Have you ever had any experience of the lodging-house chest of drawers?"

"Haven't I! They never put anything in the drawer one expects it to be in, and you have to wrestle with them, all before you find what you want—"

"No one ever puts anything away for me," Allegra interrupted.

"And just when you're in a tremendous hurry, the only essential drawer sticks fast and won't budge," Paul continued.

"All the drawers always stick," Allegra said sadly, "and oh! the things they cause you to feel and think, and even say sometimes."

"Would you live alone in your flat with the nice old furniture?"

"No; I should have my aunt. He left me a little money, too, you know; so that if I was very tired or ill I could rest a bit without acting. Aunt will come to take care of the flat and me. Do you think I'll soon be able to earn it? If I can have that, I'm willing to go without a great many other things."

"What do you mean by other things?"

"What women usually care about. . . . It truly doesn't interest me much, except that, of course, I suppose you could depict passion better if you had felt it; but then so often the real thing is hampering and spoils one's work——"

"And what about home, and family, and own people to love you when you are old?"

Allegra shuddered: "I hate to think of being

Allegra

old, because I shan't have those things. I may fall in love—if I do, it will probably be with somebody who has a beautiful singing voice, and can act . . . but. . . .”

“No,” interrupted Paul decidedly, “you mustn’t do that. When you come to London I’ll take you to Pagani’s for lunch, and you shall see the beautiful voices eat . . . then you won’t feel in the least inclined to fall in love with them.”

“I don’t know; a great gift would weigh heavily in the balance against any amount of unpleasant personal habits. . . .”

“But if you had to live with the habits always?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t live with the habits for long,” Allegra said airily. “It would only be for the experience and to improve my technique and my grasp.”

“I’m not sure,” Paul said slowly, “that such an experience would improve either. But you are not serious. I lay my money on that fastidiousness you spoke of.”

Allegra sighed. “It’s nothing to be proud of: it’s a very great stumbling-block. As long as he was alive I couldn’t possibly have done anything to vex or distress him—but now . . . it couldn’t trouble him.”

“Are you so sure of that?” asked Paul.

Allegra looked a little startled. . . . “You think that, too?” she said. “Sometimes I have thought so, but put it out of my head as nonsense.”

“I don’t think I should put it out of my head as nonsense if I were you. You can’t get away

Allegra

from his influence, you know. Besides, don't you think that just because he *isn't* there to enforce it, you're in a way bound . . . to remain a princess always?"

It was very still in the little room. The logs had burned to a dull red, and the lamp on the table, with its grand green silk shade that was the pride of Dorcas, threw but little light on the trio by the fire.

For a full minute Allegra sat silent, then with a sigh she said, "That fastidiousness you commend points out to me that it is half-past nine, and Mrs. Camm will be wanting to shut up the house and go to bed."

She rose, and Paul helped her into her coat.

"Shall I see you at breakfast?" he asked.

Allegra shook her head. "Mrs. Camm brings me breakfast in bed; Mrs. Dancey arranged that for me. Good-night, dear Simon. What, are you both coming with me? That's very nice of you."

Saturday night was a busy night at the Black Lamb, and it was nearly eleven o'clock before Dorcas had "cleared up" to her satisfaction. As she set the last of the mugs she had been washing upon the shelf, she remarked to Albert:

"It's a pity as to-morrow's Sunday, else you might 'a got down that sack for me as is in chimney upstairs."

"Not worth while, is it?" Albert answered.
"And 'er only here till Tuesday."

"It's Mr. Paul I'm thinking about, not 'er."

"Well, he's a-goin' first thing Monday."

Allegra

“Albert, you be a gawpus. There’s a deal o’ mischief can come to pass in twenty-four hours; and what’d Squire and his good lady say if Mr. Paul was to take up with a young lady as comes from dear knows where, and none of us knows nothing about?”

“Well. . . .” said Albert slowly, “the same idee did cross my mind when she did want to come.”

Dorcas stood still in the middle of the room, and stared incredulously at her husband.

“Then why in the name of fortun’ didn’t ye give it a name?”

Albert scratched his head. “Well, I reckoned it out as a woman’s allus on to that sort o’ caddle before you can say knife, an’ if you didn’t see no danger, there couldn’t be no danger.”

“An’ I don’t suppose there *be* no danger neither,” said Dorcas haughtily; “but I’m sorry I couldn’t put no fire in that room.”

Albert chuckled. “‘Tis easier for to light a fire nor to put un out,” he said sententiously.

And for once Albert had the last word, for Dorcas carried her candle upstairs in dead silence.

CHAPTER V

IT was Sunday morning: a perfect morning, clear, fresh, and sunny. Paul, his hands in his pockets, stood outside the sitting-room window, laughing at a little comedy which was taking place on the lawn, where Danny was toddling with dignified uncertainty in pursuit of Simon, who wandered aimlessly round and round the lawn, holding an angry, spitting white kitten in his mouth.

Simon could never resist the temptation to pick up and carry any small animal in his huge jaws. He never hurt it: he was not hurting the kitten, as Paul well knew; but she, naturally, resented her undignified position, a position which was prolonged because Simon knew that the instant he set her down, she would seize that precise moment to give him a vicious scratch on his nose.

It had happened often before. Simon was fully aware of the retribution in store for him should he dare to pick up and carry away the tempting, soft white ball so innocently lapping milk from a saucer set outside Paul's window. Yet he couldn't resist it. He carried the kitten away from her breakfast. And now he was afraid to set her down, for she stated loudly and emphatically her opinion of dogs in general and of Simon in particular as the most abandoned, brutal, despicable member of a detested tribe.

As for Danny, the instinct of the tracker was

Allegra

evidently strong in him. It never seemed to occur to Danny that he might head off Simon by making a dash across the little lawn. Round and round did he go exactly in Simon's wake, as though he were part of a procession. Solemn, earnest, busy, making rather obscure observations about "bow-wows" as he went, and all the time delightedly aware of this wonderful new power of going where he pleased without even a sustaining hand to guide him.

For the moment, probably from lack of breath, the kitten ceased her vituperations. Simon laid her gently on the lawn. She let out with her paw and inflicted three scratches on his long black nose. Then she darted at Paul and swarmed up him as though he were a curtain; fluffed herself out and sat proud and mocking on Paul's shoulder, whispering ostentatiously in his ear that Simon might see.

Simon did see. He gave one despairing yelp indicative of his lacerated nose and feelings, one despairing glance in the direction of his enemy-invested master, and dashed away to take cover behind a singularly scrubby chrysanthemum in one of the borders.

It was one of Simon's obsessions that the minutest plant would hide him, should he desire seclusion. He would hide behind a daisy with touching faith in its concealing qualities.

Danny of the single purpose, still muttering busily to himself, toddled unsteadily in Simon's direction. This time he overtook his quarry, who lay prone, heavily squashing a bed of mignon-

Allegra

ette. Danny made ineffectual efforts to sit down on Simon, but the great back was too high for him and he only succeeded in slipping down into the mignonette, leaning happily against Simon's sun-warmed side; and there they sat and communed together, Danny doubtless administering consolation.

Meanwhile the kitten continued to preen herself on Paul's shoulder and whisper in his ear, till she suddenly discovered that Simon was too busy with Danny to take any notice of her. Thereupon she swarmed down Paul as fast as she had swarmed up, and returned to her interrupted breakfast.

"Simon, you idiot!" Paul shouted. "Come off that flower-bed and let me look at your nose."

Simon arose obediently, but waited politely while Danny pulled himself to his feet by holding on to one of Simon's legs, and the procession reformed across the little lawn.

The flattened mignonette offered its sweet incense to the sun-warmed air. Paul was inspecting Simon's nose without expressing any sympathy, as through the open doorway of the inn came Allegra, fresh and smiling, yet with her habitual look of soft severity as though on some high quest.

Her expression changed to one of commiseration as she caught sight of Simon: "Oh, poor dog! will he come with me and have it bathed?"

"No need, really," said Paul. "He only got what he jolly well deserved."

"I'm sure he ought to have it bathed," Allegra insisted firmly. "Come, Simon."

Allegra

Simon went like a lamb.

"Danny," Paul remarked confidentially, "where did she learn to speak like that? I'm sure it wasn't at Oxford, and I'm equally sure that if she stood up on the stage of the Coliseum, looking just as she does now, and recited 'Little Miss Muffet' in that voice, she'd take the town. We must get her to London, Danny; we simply must, somehow . . ."

"Bid bow-wow dawn," Danny announced sadly.
"Cally."

He suddenly felt tired and held up his arms to Paul, who lifted him. He surveyed the garden from this eminence, and pointing to the kitten now slumbering peacefully in the sunshine, beside the empty saucer, drew Paul's attention to her, announcing, "Put-tie."

A robin in a distant holly-bush began to sing.

"Oh, it's a good old world, Danny," said Paul, giving the baby a little squeeze; "a good old world, with dogs and cats and robins and little boys in it: and just now and then a mysterious princess with a voice that gives you little thrills all down your spine, it has such lovely notes in it. Although your excellent mother will be shocked, my son, I've no intention whatever of going to church. If she'll let me I purpose spending this perfect morning in the society of the Princess, for I feel it in my bones that she isn't going to church either. Ah, here is mother. Dorcas, your son has walked enough; he's a bit tired."

"Is he, the lamb?" Dorcas exclaimed, taking her somewhat unwilling little son from Paul's

Allegra

arms. "I'll put 'un in 'is perambulator an' Elsie can wheel 'un about till 'e goes off. It be a quarter to eleven, sir, and it's a good step to the church."

Dorcas spoke in her "responsible under-nurse's" voice, and Paul felt about six. "Vicar he knows as you're here, for he looked in, Friday it was, about 'alf-past five, and I did mention it casual-like, and I knows as he'd enjoy a few words after service. 'Tain't Communion Sunday, so you wouldn't be kep' long if you were to wait for 'un in the churchyard. Miss Compson, too, she'll be there for certain."

"The deuce she will," thought Paul. Aloud he said, rather timidly—for he never quite lost the feeling that Dorcas might take his hand and lead him sternly to the church door—"I was thinking of taking Simon for a walk, Dorcas. You see, I must make the most of our time. . . ."

"Elsie can take Simon along of Danny," Dorcas interrupted, severe disapproval in both face and voice, "this morning; and 'e can go out along of you in the afternoon. You'd better make haste, sir, or you'll be late."

Paul sat down on the grass. "It's no good, Dorcas," he said. "I couldn't do it in the time, and it's against my principles ever to be late for any service."

"Better late nor not at all," Dorcas replied rather sadly; "and the dew ain't off that grass, Mr. Paul, so you've no call to sit there."

Danny fidgeted and whimpered in his mother's arms.

Allegra

"Put him in his pram, Dorcas, and don't you worry about me. I'll put in two churches sometime to make up. Miss Burford has been bathing Simon's nose—it's that kitten, really, has made us both late. . . . Here they are. You attend to poor Danny, and don't bother about me."

They spent the morning in the woods, Paul and Simon and Allegra. They lunched together, and in the afternoon took Simon for a huge walk along hilly roads whence they surveyed great stretches of the glorious Cotswold country. They persuaded a friendly cottager to provide tea for them, and of course Paul discovered that the good woman's nephew had once been in his father's service, whereupon she produced some special quince jam of superlative excellence.

It was nearly eight o'clock when they got back, and Dorcas, chilling in manner and grave of face, informed Paul that the Vicar and Miss Compson had "looked in" to see him between Sunday-school and evening service.

Had Allegra been less hungry she would have refused to stay for supper, for she felt the disapproval in the air. But Dorcas had laid their supper in Paul's sitting-room, so they had it together. It was a quiet and rather melancholy meal. Allegra, though she could stand about tirelessly for hours at rehearsal, was unused to long walks, and was dreadfully tired. She went home to bed at nine o'clock. Not even the wood-fire could keep her, though again the evening had turned very cold.

She bade Paul and Simon good-by at Mrs.

Allegra

Camm's gate, whither they escorted her. They were to start quite early next morning, and Allegra declared firmly that nothing on earth would get her up before lunch time.

As Paul sat smoking in his sitting-room that night, he reflected whimsically that, while he had heard a great deal about the thoughts, hopes, aspirations, and intentions of Allegra; while she had been frank as possible about her life, both at Oxford and in the theatre since, she had asked nothing about him. Nothing about his people, his past, his hopes, or his future. Much as he admired her, this struck him as a little odd. He found people so interesting. He always ardently desired to know about them, and they were generally more than ready to oblige him.

"It's a funny thing, Simon," he said, as he knocked his pipe out on the hearth, "how few people ever want to know anything about us. I fear we're rather a dull pair. People ain't interested in us, eh, Simon?"

Simon looked foolishly adoring as usual, and assured Paul that to him, at all events, every smallest matter concerning his master was of supreme interest.

That's where the right sort of dog is such a comfort.

But Paul was wrong as to a lack of interest in the general public.

Miss Compson had cross-examined Dorcas pretty severely as to the young lady staying at Mrs. Camm's. She elicited the facts that the said young lady and Paul had already partaken of

Allegra

three meals together; that they were at that moment scouring the country unchaperoned save by Simon; and, worst of all, that Dorcas really knew nothing of the young lady save that she was, until the upsetting Paul arrived, of quiet and studious habits.

That your people are well known throughout a county has many advantages. For instance, the unexpected appearance of quince conserve at a cottage tea-table. But there are considerable items on the debit side of the account. Your absence from church—if you happen to be in the neighbourhood—is noted, and causes adverse comment; and your movements generally are remarked with a precision that may be flattering but that certainly has its inconvenient side.

Having discovered from Dorcas that Paul's people were in Scotland, Miss Compson, who knew his mother but slightly, felt impelled to write her a letter next day concerning a bazaar, timed to take place at Payne's Edge early in November, and asking for contributions to her stall. She concluded the missive thus:

"We were so sorry not to see your son when he was here over Sunday, but found he was out with that young lady who, it appears, was also staying there. They seem great friends, Mrs. Dancey said. Girls are very independent nowadays, aren't they?—staying at inns by themselves. I should hardly have thought that Mrs. Dancey had room for two sets of guests. In fact, she owned to me that she had to give them their

Allegra

meals in Mr. Staniland's sitting-room, but as they are such great friends, I suppose it did not matter. I hope you have good weather, if that hope is compatible with good sport for the Squire. I know fishermen don't like too much sunshine, but that, I believe, is rare in Scotland, and that it generally rains all the time.

"With kindest regards, believe me,
"Yours most sincerely,
"MURIEL COMPSON."

On Monday morning Allegra found it impossible to concentrate her mind upon Nora. She was extremely sensitive to mental atmosphere, and directly she entered the Black Lamb she was conscious of a distinct drop in the temperature. She had risen comparatively early, and sought her little sanctum upstairs about ten o'clock, only to be met on the landing by Dorcas and most of its furniture, as the room was undergoing a thorough "turn-out."

"You've no occasion to sit here now, miss," Dorcas announced as Allegra appeared. "Not as you did sit here *much*," she added severely. "All your things is took downstairs to the parlour."

Allegra murmured something meek and deprecatory and went downstairs again. All her things were in the parlour. Nothing had been forgotten. Everything was arranged with meticulous neatness. Yet the room seemed bare and empty as she entered it. Out-of-doors the weather was lovely as ever, but inside she felt a chill over everything. Dorcas was somehow more official and less

Allegra

motherly: the familiar furniture prim and forbidding.

On the mantelpiece a square white envelope addressed to her was placed in front of the clock. She seized it eagerly; as, just then, she would have grasped any kind, outstretched hand.

Inside it was Paul's card with the address of his club, and, written, that of his rooms.

Nothing more, no word of any kind.

She stood twisting the card between her slender fingers, frowning a little as she pondered.

Surely he might have written a short, graceful note in farewell. She would have liked a little note.

Would he remember?

Was the card with his address a hint that she must remind him of the date for *The Doll's House*?

For nearly four years she had worked in a hard school. Though naturally buoyant and hopeful, and thoroughly absorbed in her own concerns and her own career, she had learned not to expect too much from outsiders. Perhaps because she was so absorbed in her work as it affected herself, she was not over sanguine about her fellow creatures. Not that she was distrustful, but she had learned to be a little afraid of optimism. So sadly often the hoped-for hit did not come off. She felt aggrieved that Dorcas should misjudge her. She knew quite well that she was suspected of an ordinary flirtation with Paul, and her own conscience entirely acquitted her of anything of the sort. Approval was to Allegra what light is to a plant.

Allegra

Without it she shrivelled and drooped. She couldn't bear to feel that any one she was with should be, as she put it, "against her." She would do anything to conciliate and she hated to be misjudged.

Much as she loved admiration, she cared for liking even more.

To many girls in her position it wouldn't have mattered a whit that their landlady's manner was respectfully chilly and disapproving. They would have dismissed her as "a silly old cat" of no account.

Allegra couldn't do this. For one thing, much experience of theatrical lodgings made her realise how free from eye-service was the care for their comfort that good Dorcas lavished upon her guests. For another, she really liked Dorcas, and she loved Bitley. For her it held a hundred tender memories in connection with her guardian. And she knew that if Dorcas disapproved of her she would never be allowed to come back, "not if it was ever so."

That any door should be shut upon her was more than Allegra could bear.

She replaced Paul's card in its envelope, put it in the pocket of her coat, and went out through the window into the morning sunshine. She even forgot to take with her the annotated copy of *The Doll's House*.

The white kitten saw her coming and whisked up a tree, expecting that Allegra would stand beneath and entice her to come down. But Allegra took no notice of the white kitten. She

Allegra

walked swiftly through the terraced garden into the wood, and down through the wood to the wire fence that bordered the road leading to the church. She climbed the fence and wandered along the sunny road till she reached the low wall of the church-yard and there she stood and waited.

There is something about a church in the country that causes the passing wayfarer to pause, whether they are interested in churches or not. Bitley Church was neither old nor lovely. In a country that abounds in ancient and exquisite buildings it is, architecturally, quite negligible. But it is beautifully situated and is not a blot upon the landscape because the Cotswold stone grows grey and harmonious in a few years. It was built in 1856, and was then described as a "neat stone edifice consisting of nave, chancel, and small bell-turret."

Out from the church came Miss Compson, who had been putting water in the altar vases. Allegra, always on the lookout for types, instantly decided that if she ever had to play a "clergy-lady" she would make up exactly like Miss Compson. Everything about Miss Compson, like the church, was neat and trim. She had a well-defined slim waist—years after the waist had disappeared from the figures of other women. Her hats were always small and close. Her dark coat, which matched her skirt—no sloppy "woollies" for Miss Compson—fitted admirably. Her features were neat, her eyes small and keen-sighted, and she instantly recognised the hesitating figure at the gate as that of the strange girl

Allegra

staying at the Black Lamb. Mrs. Dancey had proved a most unsatisfactory source of information. Here was a chance to gratify her curiosity. Besides, Miss Compson prided herself on a wide-minded and friendly attitude towards all strangers in Bitley.

"Did you want to see the church?" she asked, smiling graciously at Allegra. Her smile was the only wide thing about her, wide and toothy. "It is never shut until sunset."

Just at that moment Allegra was feeling so lonely she would have welcomed friendly advances from a tramp, so she smiled back: "Oh, thank you, but I think I won't go in. I've seen it before, you know. Isn't it a beautiful morning?"

"Yes, wonderful for the time of year," said Miss Compson, leaning upon the wall, prepared for a chat. "And how does our church strike you?"

Allegra was innately truthful; moreover, she had grown up amidst the domes and steeples and grey-roofed gracious buildings of Oxford. She could not know that Miss Compson's life before she came to Bitley had been passed at Worthing, and that she whole-heartedly admired it. That for her, the typical Cotswold architecture had no appeal. Therefore was Allegra quite innocent of offence when she said:

"It's curious, isn't it, how the Victorian architects seem wholly to have lost the devotional spirit so characteristic of the older churches?"

"I can't agree with you there," Miss Compson replied stiffly. "We pride ourselves upon the devotional spirit in our church. Surely that is a

Allegra

matter depending far more on the priest than on a mere building. My brother is Rector here, you know."

"Of course, of course," Allegra assented hastily, rather alarmed at the personal aspect the conversation had so suddenly assumed. "But don't you think that in very old churches, where for hundreds of years people have prayed and been glad and sorry, there's something all round you that gives an indefinable feeling. . . ."

"I can see," Miss Compson interrupted indulgently, "that you are fanciful and romantic. . . . You're staying at the Danceys', aren't you? Are you making a long visit?"

"I go back to-morrow, alas!" sighed Allegra.

"Is your home far from here?"

"At Westingley."

"A busy place, isn't it?" Miss Compson remarked in a voice that invited further information. "But rather dirty."

"It will seem very dirty and gloomy after this."

"Can't you manage to stay a little longer while the weather is so fine?"

"I fear not; I'm obliged to go back to-morrow."

Miss Compson and Allegra looked at one another searchingly over the low wall. And suddenly Allegra realised that this neat lady was not really kind and friendly, she was only inquisitive. And Allegra's eyes began to dance, for she felt a sudden and frivolous desire to have a game with Miss Compson. Even as the white kitten would whisk up a tree in the hope of pursuit of some sort, so did Allegra suddenly feel a new relish for life,

Allegra

the tang of it, the *amusingness*. She would get them to give her the very next clergy-lady that came in a play and she'd be Miss Compson. She couldn't possibly let her go yet. She must study her a little more. The thought passed in a flash and she said softly: "It must be lovely to live here as you do."

"One can always be happy if one is fully occupied. Do you live a busy life at Westingley?"

"Oh, very," exclaimed Allegra. "I never seem to have a minute to call my own," and she practised Miss Compson's own wide smile upon Miss Compson.

"She's not quite so nice looking as I imagined at first sight," that lady thought to herself. Aloud she said: "I've always heard that Westingley is a progressive place, with University Extension Lectures and so on. Courses, you know, of all sorts of things. I suppose you go in for them all?"

"Well, hardly all. . . . You see, I have many other claims upon me."

Allegra's eyes were bright with fun above the wide smile, and in her heels she felt that extraordinary sensation that is usually associated with spring and not with late September. A wild desire assailed her to fling herself into Nora's Tarantella here and now, under the very shadow of the prim church and before the neat Miss Compson's astonished gaze. She restrained the impulse, feeling she had not yet sufficiently studied Miss Compson.

"Ah," said that lady, "I see you have many dear ones, are doubtless one of a large family."

Allegra

"Oh, very large," assented Allegra, with an enthusiastic tremor of laughter in her voice as she recalled the Westingley Repertory company. Well, she was fond of most of them. It was quite true.

"You're a home-bird, I can see," Miss Compson said condescendingly, "and I'm glad to hear it. There is so much unrest nowadays among girls, family claims are apt to be neglected."

"Far, far too much," Allegra agreed in Miss Compson's very tones, still cultivating the wide smile till her cheeks ached.

A footstep sounded, and round the bend of the road came the Rector, the Reverend Leonard Compson.

He was not short-sighted, he did not wear spectacles, and he instantly perceived that his sister was intimately conversing with the mysterious and attractive looking stranger staying at the Black Lamb. He hastened towards them and Allegra's face reassumed its habitual look of detached and gentle gravity. She dared not practise Miss Compson's smile in the presence of Miss Compson's brother.

Miss Compson caught sight of her brother. "Well," she announced abruptly, "I mustn't interrupt your walk any more. Good-morning."

But she was on the wrong side of the low wall. Short of climbing over it, which, though quite easy, would have been undignified, she had to go along to the gate, and reached it at the same moment as Allegra and the Rector, who had overtaken her. The Rector stopped. Allegra waited a

Allegra

moment politely for Miss Compson to pass out. The Rector took off his hat and Allegra smiled at him; her own smile, not his sister's.

"Muriel, my dear, present me," he said in a big, jolly voice, holding his soft felt hat in his hand as though he expected Allegra to put a penny in it. She noted the gesture for future use by one of her "dear ones."

He looked much nicer without his hat. His hair was curly, his face broad, good-natured, and cheerful. He was not in the least like Miss Compson, and was ten years younger.

Allegra stood quite still, and looked at him again gravely and directly.

Miss Compson turned red. "I'm afraid I can't," she said uncomfortably. . . . "I only spoke to the young lady as she passed."

"Burford is my name," Allegra said with soft distinctness, and without waiting for Miss Compson's intervention added, "and you are Mr. Compson. Of course I've heard about you from Mrs. Dancey."

"The Danceys are excellent people," the big cheerful voice continued; "excellent people. I'm sure they make you comfortable, now don't they? I've never heard a complaint from any one staying there. In fact, I think I may say the Black Lamb is unique of its kind. Don't you agree with me?"

"Entirely. I'm devoted to Mrs. Dancey, and I think you're very lucky to have her in your parish —don't you?"

"Come, Lennie," Miss Compson interrupted,

Allegra

"we're delaying the young lady," and turned in the opposite direction.

"You're going this way, are you?" he asked Allegra, ignoring his sister. "Then our ways lie together— Good-by, Muriel; don't forget the Book Club list."

Allegra bowed and she and the Rector walked away together.

Miss Compson looked after them and gasped. As they vanished round a bend in the road she exclaimed to the listening trees: "I'm astonished at Lennie. . . . But these girls in large families—they *are* like that sometimes—so 'hail-fellow-well-met' . . . upon my word. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

IT was nearly lunch time when Allegra got back, and the Rector escorted her to the door of the Black Lamb.

He waited while she went in to fetch the annotated copy of *The Doll's House* which she lent him. And Dorcas heard him say that he would "be sure to bring it back at tea time."

Allegra innocently hoped that she would be reinstated in the good opinion of Dorcas when she turned thus evidently under the *aegis* of the Church, but it seemed to have quite a contrary effect.

Dorcas brought in the cold mutton left over from the Sunday joint, the pickled walnuts, the mashed potatoes without a lump, the excellent salad, and set them down without one single word save:

"Your lunch is ready, miss."

"Could she still be sulking about Mr. Staniland?" thought poor Allegra. "How tiresome people are!"

All the same she felt more fortified to bear the coldness of Dorcas since the Rector had been so kind and sympathetic and interested. He had even noted down in his pocket-book the date of the coming performance of *The Doll's House* at Westingley.

Allegra

Mr. Compson was late for the Rectory cold mutton. His sister had already begun her meal when he arrived. She sat facing the window and saw him come up the drive. Notwithstanding his unpunctuality he went first to his study and put the book he had borrowed from Miss Burford in the drawer of his desk where he kept his sermon paper.

At luncheon he did not so much as mention Ibsen or Granville Barker, Barrie or R. C. Carton, Henry Arthur Jones or Pinero or Galsworthy—or, indeed, any of the playwrights he had spent the morning in discussing.

“What are her people?” Miss Compson asked abruptly.

“Whose people?”

“That girl’s who walked you off this morning.”

“Muriel! you really have an extraordinary way of putting things. I don’t think Miss Burford mentioned her people.”

She had talked about her dear ones all the time, only she didn’t call them that to the Rector.

“She told *me* she was a member of a very large family.”

“Then I’ve no doubt she is,” said the Rector soothingly. “She is a cultivated and interesting young lady . . . at least,” he added, “so I judged her to be from the little I saw of her.”

“You didn’t go far with her, then?”

The Rector jumped up from the table. “See that I am not interrupted, please, Muriel; I am going to my study.”

Allegra

He went. He locked himself in. It might have been Saturday.

He read right through *The Doll's House*, stage directions, notes, and all. He pondered it deeply and, incidentally, thought a good deal about Allegra.

The Rector desired above all things to be modern, broad-minded, and progressive. He believed in the Union of Church and Stage for the Uplifting of the People. Allegra was quite a new type to him. Only once before had he spoken to an actress. In his undergraduate days he had taken out one Miss Friskey Vandaleur, in a Canadian canoe on the Cher. She was playing in a musical comedy touring company then in Oxford. Miss Friskey Vandaleur was delightfully pretty, but the Rector remembered that, though at the time he felt himself a devil of a fellow, he had found her very difficult to talk to, and there had been long, embarrassing pauses.

With Allegra, who, though undoubtedly attractive, in no way resembled Miss Friskey, he had found quite the contrary, though he was unaware that it was she who had done most of the talking. He felt stimulated, eager, thirsty for a larger draught of life than that provided in Bitley just then.

At four he unlocked his door and went out by the window.

A little later, when Miss Compson came to fetch him to tea, she found a slip of paper on his blotting-pad:—

“Back at six.”

Allegra

The censorious undoubtedly enjoy their feeling of superiority over their frailer brethren, but they lose something.

Nobody, voluntarily, ever tells them anything.

CHAPTER VII

"**A**ND now, doubtless," said Dallas Flint, "you want to know what the bit of work is, that I can get you. I warn you, you mayn't like the idea at all, but it might be worth while all the same."

"I've been dying to know, all evening," Paul confessed, "but throughout my life they've rubbed it into me that I'm far too fond of asking questions—so I've politely waited your pleasure."

They had dined and were sitting over coffee and cigars in Dallas Flint's comfortable dining-room in Bedford Square.

"I suppose you never happen to have read any of Matthew Maythorne's books, have you?"

"Good Lord, no," said Paul. "Why should I? Have you?"

Dallas Flint's blue eyes behind the large-lensed rimless *pince-nez* twinkled with amusement. He had a small cherubic, clean-shaven face that was all innocence and benignity. It was only those that met him in the way of business who fully realised his extraordinary firmness and acumen.

"Well, no," he answered, "I can't say I have—though he is a client of mine—but he has an enormous circulation. There are shops in Bradford and Huddersfield where they stock hardly anything else but the cheap editions of his books. Shelves upon shelves of 'em, and they sell like hot

Allegra

cakes. Superior youngsters fresh from Cambridge may sniff at him, but he has got a vast public and his sales run into hundreds of thousands of copies a year."

"Yes?" queried Paul, quite unimpressed.
"Really?"

"Well, it seems he is not content with his literary fame; he has theatrical aspirations as well. He wants one of his books dramatised. If you care to try your hand at it he'll pay you fifty pounds for the work, and should it be put on, one per cent of the takings. But your name would not appear, nor would you, in the very remote contingency of a success, get any public *kudos* whatsoever. That must be clearly understood. At the same time, if it was a success the theatrical people—and they're the ones who really matter—would know it was your work, and you could come to rehearsals, and it might bring you into touch with all sorts of useful folk."

Paul looked very dubious: "I'd need to read the book first," he said slowly. "I might not see any play in it. I suppose there's a plot?"

Dallas Flint smiled. "I don't think you need adhere slavishly to the plot—that's the mistake the last chap made. I must tell you Maythorne has already had a try, got the thing dramatised—but no manager in London would handle it. Maythorne won't care how far you get from his book, provided the result is staged and he gets the credit for it."

"I've heard," Paul said slowly, "that he buys his plots from all sorts of ghosts."

Allegra

"That's quite possible. It's done constantly in his particular branch of letters. . . ."

"Letters!" Paul interrupted scornfully.

"Literary trade, if you prefer it. After all, literature's a trade like anything else, if you want to live by it, and Maythorne always pays cash for what he wants. He states his terms quite plainly and it's up to you to take them or leave them."

"But suppose I ran right away from his old book and wrote a play on my own?"

"If it was accepted by any manager I don't think Maythorne would complain—the question is, would you like your play to go forth to the world under his name? *He* wouldn't care—but you might."

"If I undertake the thing I'll abide by the conditions, sir. Maythorne risks his fifty pounds—I suppose he'll pay me for the work whether the play ever sees the light or not?"

"Oh dear, yes. If you undertake the work you'll get the money in advance. I'll see to that."

"I think," Paul murmured uncomfortably, "I'd rather do the play first. He might hate my work."

"He must risk that. You can't upset existing arrangements. The question is, will you do it?"

"I'll read the book first, sir."

"I wouldn't read it too carefully," Flint said easily. "Just get a general notion of the thing. I warn you you'll be repelled by the . . . ahem . . . style."

"Do you really believe that a play with May-

Allegra

thorne's name to it is more likely to get staged than one by an unknown man? . . . *Maythorne's name, mind!*"

"Yes, I do. Moreover, he's probably quite ready to put some money in it . . . and whatever you and I may think of his work . . ."

"I don't think of it . . . I've never read a line—"

"The general public," Flint continued serenely, as though he had not heard, "like it very much indeed. Oh dear, yes, his name *does count.*"

"Do you know Maythorne?"

"Yes, and he's quite a pleasant fellow. Now that he has made such a lot of money, he has social aspirations and is keen to be in the swim and to know the best people."

"And the best people?"

"It depends on what you call the best people, my boy. He's got plenty of friends, anyhow, and if the strictly literary set won't acknowledge his existence, he consoles himself with the fact that in many cases the better they write the less they're read, and consequently the poorer they are. He gives largely to the literary charities. He entertains a great deal. He's a devoted father and an admirable citizen. What more do you want?"

"I'll tell you what I want very much, sir," Paul said eagerly, leaning forward with his large bright eyes fixed on Flint's face. "I want you in about three weeks to come down with me to Westingley to see a girl act who's in the Repertory company there. . . ."

Flint groaned.

Allegra

"No, it's not what you think—she really is rather exceptional. I've never met anybody so utterly wrapped up in a profession as she is in hers."

"Seen her act?"

"Not yet. I've only just got to know her. But she does impress me as strikingly individual. She has been on the stage over four years. She seems to know her business—but it's her mental attitude towards it that impresses me so."

"I suppose she's good-looking?" Flint spoke wearily but with patience.

"That's the odd thing about it. You don't think about her looks. She's very graceful. I suppose she is pretty, in a severe sort of way, but it's her personality that impresses you; her extraordinary enthusiasm and earnestness."

"Give me her name, and I'll make enquiries about her. Of course she wants a London engagement? They always do."

"Allegra Burford is her name, and she is almost indecently frank about her wants . . . but all the same I believe she has a future, and I'd like to have your opinion, sir."

"What do you want me to see her in?"

"*The Doll's House*. She was working at that when I met her. Her conception of the part was quite interesting and original."

"Perhaps you'll see a part for her in Maythorne's play. But let me give you this much advice—if you do, and if you want to help the girl, don't make it a star part. She won't get that for a long time yet. But a little part . . . a part

Allegra

with some scope for this individuality you are so struck with, a young part . . . and it might be worked. Anyway, as an understudy. There aren't too many *ingénues* on the stage just now with any punch. There's always a girl and lots of love-making in Maythorne's books. I've no doubt you can work it. I'll make enquiries, but I don't promise to come and see her, mind. Westingley's a devil of a long way off," grumbled Flint, "and to tell you the truth, I'm a bit afraid of Repertory; I've heard of so many reputed swans that turn out geese. Besides, you say you haven't seen her act. Where did you come across her?"

"She was staying down at Bitley this last week."

"With people you know?"

"No, sir; at the Inn. She's been there before with her guardian, and, having a few days off, came there again to work at 'Nora.'"

"Well, don't get entangled, that's all."

"I assure you, sir," Paul said earnestly, "there's nothing of that sort. I never met a girl who was more detached. I don't believe she'd have anything to say to any one in love with her. All she cares about is her 'art,' as she calls it."

Flint made a grimace.

Paul had risen as he spoke, for the clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven.

Simon, sternly banished from the hearth to a distant corner of the room, rose and came across to his master.

"I suppose you're walking back because of that great beast?" asked Flint.

Allegra

"I'll take a taxi through the traffic and walk across the park. It was very good of you to let Simon come. He very seldom goes out in the evening."

"Well, here's Maythorne's book, and you can take the dramatised version too, if you care to see it. Let me know as soon as you can whether you accept the commission."

"I'll take the book, sir, but I'd rather not have the other chap's play. I'd like to see for myself whether any sort of play is possible."

"Remember!" Flint said, with upraised, warning finger. "Don't let yourself be hampered by the book. There's sure to be one incident or so that you can transpose. Let yourself go. Write your own play. Make it as human as you can, and look upon the whole thing as merely the thin end of the wedge. And don't think too much about that Miss Burford. She may be all you believe her to be; but, again, she may be just an ordinary hard-working little actress who takes herself very seriously; they all do that, though—and you can't tell."

"But if you saw her act, *you* could tell, sir, couldn't *you*?" pleaded Paul.

"I could tell whether she gets this personality of hers over the footlights. But no mortal can tell how she'd strike London. It's all one huge gamble, and the people who break the bank are few and far between."

When Paul had gone, Dallas Flint sat down by the dying fire and lit another cigar. His family

Allegra

had not yet returned from the country; he and the cook were the sole occupants of the big, comfortable old Adam house. But he had asked Paul there in preference to his club because he wanted to talk freely to him, and the walls in clubs have ears. He liked the boy as he loved the boy's father. There was something piquant, too, in the extraordinary unlikeness of the pair, in their great affection for one another, and in the older man's immense tolerance for tastes he neither shared nor understood. But then Paul both shared and understood his father's tastes. He loved the country and country pursuits as dearly as he loved letters, and he never expected his family to understand his literary leanings. They had enough in common without that. But what he did expect, and what, hitherto, had never failed him, was his father's tolerance of incomprehensible vagaries. A tolerance that made such vagaries possible.

Thus, when, after taking a respectable but by no means brilliant degree at Cambridge, Paul announced that—if his father would continue his allowance for a year or two—he would like “to go in seriously for writing,” the squire considered the question, and he came to the conclusion that it was the only thing to be done with Paul. But he was old-fashioned enough to believe in the enlightening effect of foreign travel, and sent Paul out to India for six months to visit his elder brother, a field-gunner stationed at Mian-Mir, and a married sister, wife of another gunner. Paul came back from India thinner and browner

Allegra

than ever, and more than ever radiant and eager. He declared he had had the time of his life, that he loved the East, and was going back there as soon as he had made some money out of his 'stuff.' He had written quite a lot of stuff out there, and, to the astonishment and gratification of his family, a number of his little sketches were printed and paid for (very moderately) by *The Piccadilly Post*. The squire carried these newspapers about with him continually, and their increasing numbers bulged his capacious pockets so that he looked as though he had been poaching his own rabbits.

Then Paul wrote a curtain-raiser which was put on by amateurs in a provincial theatre for a charity. While at Cambridge he had been a rather prominent member of the A. D. C., not so much in his acting capacity, which was not great, as an authority on period and production generally.

Dallas Flint liked the little one-act play and began to take an interest in Paul over and above the interest of association. So many of the clever young men just then seemed to be narrowed and embittered in their mental outlook by uncongenial surroundings; whereas Paul, in spite of his quite conventional upbringing, was extraordinarily observant and saw all round a thing while other people were taking in but one aspect of it. He had, moreover, the knack of seizing upon and using small, quaint characteristics that stamp a creation with individuality and give it life.

Dallas Flint sat forward in his chair and flung

Allegra

the end of his cigar into the fire. "If he sees a part for this girl," he reflected, "he'll do the play—it's a risky experiment, but I want him to have his chance."

CHAPTER VIII

From Paul Staniland to Dallas Flint

"DEAR MR. FLINT:

"I've read *Riches are Sorrow* right through and I can't say that it appeals to me or that I see a play in it. All the same, it has suggested to me an idea that might be worked into something rather charming, if Maythorne would not object to a complete change of *milieu* and a period of curls and crinolines, stocks and strapped small-clothes.

"By the time I've done with it I fear there won't be anything left of the book, but if Maythorne doesn't care for the play when it is finished, I'll return him his £50; and, anyway, whatever happens, it's practice. Must I tell him beforehand what I intend to do, or can I spring it upon him finished—and face the music.

"I've already started on the play."

Telegram from Dallas Flint to Paul Staniland

Go AHEAD.

From Paul Staniland to Allegra Burford—a week later

"DEAR MISS BURFORD,

"You will be sure to let me know—won't you?—should the date for *The Doll's House* be altered

Allegra

at Westingley. I've tackled Mr. Flint on the subject, and I think I can persuade him to come down with me for one night just to see you as 'Nora'—if they give it on the dates I noted.

"Eleven days ago, just at this time, we were sitting by the fire in the parlour at the Black Lamb, and you were gently chiding me with the general scrappiness of my achievements in any direction. Your censure has borne fruit; I've been working like Billy-O on that play I spoke of, and I really hope it is shaping fairly well. I spend hours in the Print Room of the British Museum and am reading up any amount of 'Period' as well.

"Simon is sad and subdued, for he can't come to the Museum and is fobbed off with scrappy walks in Regent's Park. He lies still for hours while I scribble and mutter to myself; then suddenly he can't bear it any more, and stalks over to me, laying his great head gently on my knees. I pat him absent-mindedly till he lifts a large and heavy paw and places it upon my writing arm. This signifies that his patience is exhausted and we *must* go out, so we generally do 'and all merrie.'

"I don't think I told you—did I?—about my quaint and vastly genteel little landladies. Two middle-aged spinsters that my mother found for me because they don't object to Simon. After many and exhausting attempts to do for other maiden ladies, probably as poor and pernickety as themselves, they decided to try 'a single gentleman,' and they are awfully good to him. Moreover they regard Simon with a respectful admiration that he enjoys immensely. They look upon

Allegra

him as ‘such a protection’ and declare him to be ‘a perfect gentleman,’ which he is. They used to live in Garchester, our nearest town, but inheriting this funny little house from an uncle, they removed to St. John’s Wood some five years ago. But London hasn’t touched them really. They’re just as prim and prettily provincial as when they dwelt under the shadow of the cathedral in College Court. Don’t you like their names? Miss Diana and Miss Julia Stukeley. In playful moments I believe they address one another as ‘Di’ and ‘Judy,’ but never before me. I did hear, one very muddy day, when—in mercy to the carpet—I had shut Simon outside my room until he was dry, a seductive voice conjuring him to ‘come to his Judy then and have his paws washed,’ and presently the door was opened very quietly and Simon sauntered in. I wish Dorcas could give the dears a lesson in making coffee. Theirs is deplorable, but their attitude to Simon makes up for everything. He sends salaams. I hope you are playing to large and appreciative audiences.”

From Allegra Burford to Paul Staniland

“DEAR MR. STANILAND:

“So you have not forgotten. I rather feared you had. The dates have not been changed, and I do hope you will be able to bring Mr. Flint. Let me know which night, and perhaps that afternoon you would both come and have tea with Miss Rendal and me at our rooms. They are real theatrical diggings and would make copy for you.

Allegra

I only wish we dared invite our landlady as well—*she'd* make copy if you like; but perhaps it would hardly do. Is Mr. Flint a prim person who stands on his dignity and looks on ‘the poor player’ as a more or less fearful wild-fowl off the boards? I fancy that, deep down, you do; but you are too really well-mannered ever to show it. After you left I became acquainted with the Rector of Bitley and his sister. He is quite pleasant and intelligent.

“I like what you tell me of your hostesses (I’m sure they’d hate to be called ‘landladies’). I expect you are the chief joy and excitement of their existence. Is there a part for me in the new play? And what do you mean when you say you are ‘working on a play’? Are you cooking up some one else’s failure? *Don’t*: it’s a thankless task. You write something ‘all out of your own head,’ as children say. And don’t forget the part for me. You promised, you know. I’ll play a middle-aged maiden lady, or anything; but you must *see* me in it, mind—ME—as you write. Keep my personality in view always. I can see myself in dozens of characters—all quite different and distinct, but there I am in each of them—don’t forget that.

“You will like Rosa Rendal, my chum. She is a reliable, hard-working, capable actress, conscientious in her work and a real good sort as well. She will always have plenty of work. She will never arrive at any sort of distinction, and she knows it. Yet she is not in the least disheartened or discontented; she can take any part at a pinch;

Allegra

from Viola to Mrs. Malaprop, and give a sound, workmanlike reading . . . and yet, if I thought that sort of life was stretching out before me—year after year—I'd. . . . No, I won't be melodramatic—but I would. I can be patient enough at grind if I see a reason for it and an end—but mere grind that leads nowhere but to the earning of an honest crust—I *couldn't*.

“ Give dear Simon my love, and when I come to London he shall come and see me, and *I'll* wash his paws if they are muddy. I wish he were coming to Westingley with you, only he would hate it so and people would resent his size. Westingley people are like that. Does it make you see them ?”

CHAPTER IX

IT was Sunday. Allegra and Miss Rosa Rendal had just finished lunch. Miss Rendal lolled forward in her chair, her chin in her hands. She faced the window and the afternoon light was not kind to her. She rather resembled an old oil-painting under the cleaning process. Bits of the real, strong-featured Miss Rendal showed here and there under a thick and somewhat gritty surface of *blanc-de-perle* and rouge, and the general effect was worn and raddled. Her eyebrows were very black and her eyes were sharply outlined to match them. Her dark, coarse hair was worn low on her forehead and waved bunchily over her ears. She was thirty-eight years old, but looked more; and off the stage she made no attempt at youth. Her figure was good, big-built but lissome, and her eyes—apart from their accentuated surroundings—brown, kind, and honest, and, just then, were regarding her opposite neighbour, Allegra, with a friendly yet appraising gaze.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, "that you expect any real solid good to come of these two men seeing the show to-morrow night?"

"I don't expect, but I do hope—I hope a lot of things. I'm of a sanguine disposition, you know. You'll be able to judge whether Mr. Staniland is likely to be of any use this afternoon. He came

Allegra

behind for a minute or two last night—but you didn't see him. But *he's* not the important one. It's Dallas Flint who counts. Still, he acquires merit for bringing Dallas Flint—if he does bring him. He hasn't arrived yet."

Allegra spoke lightly, but her eyes were bright with expectation. She had had something of a success the night before as "Rose" in *Trelawny of the Wells*, and just then life seemed full of the most wonderful possibilities.

Miss Rendal looked at her silently for a minute. "You're a pretty creature," she said presently. "You've got fire and enthusiasm enough for ten people and you're uncommonly tough and strong. It all depends on your luck."

"Not altogether," Allegra objected. "I want my chance, and, given that, it won't be luck, it will be ME. If I had a part that I could make my own, get known in it. . . ."

"You're known here in lots of parts. You'll allow that—surely?"

"I do allow it. But here, in repertory, their very number seems to me to diminish the impression one makes. Perhaps a lot of impressions *are* necessarily thinner than one solid chunk of the same impression. In London, sometimes even in the provinces, when a piece has a long run you hear of people—it's generally men—going fourteen or fifteen times to see the same show. Well, they can't do that here, for it's always taken off almost directly."

"But they can come and see you fourteen times in different things."

Allegra

"That isn't the same. I want to make a big impression as some one character, so that Mrs. A. will say to Mrs. B., 'Have you seen Miss Burford as "Nora"?' And that can't happen here; for if Mrs. A. *did* ask that question at the end of this week, Mrs. B. would have no chance of seeing Miss Burford as 'Nora,' for Miss Burford will be playing that dismal 'Olwen' in the Manx play with the unpronounceable name. . . . And unless Mrs. B. is a friend of the patron saint of Westingley theatre she certainly won't come to see that."

Miss Rendal sat very still: "I wonder," she said softly. "I wonder."

"I know what you wonder," Allegra answered gaily. "Whether I'll get anything. You think I'm crazy to throw up my job here before I've definitely got something in London. Well, you know what Drake is. He wants to bind me for another year, and if I won't be bound for another year I'm to go. Mind, he's quite fair. I like Drake—he's even offered to raise my salary a very little; but I'm going. I want to be free for the least little part in a London production when the chance comes along, for unless I'm free I couldn't take it—so that's that! I wish you'd come too."

Miss Rendal shook her head. "I'm very comfortable here, thank you. I happen to know London and the weary hunt for engagements and the tramping round and the waiting and the odious men some of the managers are; not decent, kindly, human souls like Drake. You've been lucky so far . . . safe and lucky."

Allegra

"What are you afraid of for me?" Allegra asked impatiently. "You know I'm not silly; you've seen how I can work. Honestly now, Rosa, have I brains and temperament, or have I not?"

Miss Rendal suddenly lifted her chin from her hands, pushed her empty plate away, and let her arms fall limply on the table. "My dear," she said impressively, "you've enough egotistic gas in your character to float you up to the very top of the profession." And she moved to an armchair by the fire.

For a moment Allegra looked disconcerted. Then she too rose briskly and, opening the door, rang a handbell vigorously; came back, piled the plates and dishes on a tray which she placed on a chair, brushed the table-cloth, folded it and put it in the drawer of a nondescript piece of furniture their landlady called a "console." She brushed the carpet and put the crumbs in the fire; brushed the hearth, opened the window at the bottom—it was already open at the top—and by the time she had finished doing these things Mrs. Dickman appeared to bear away the tray.

"I will say," panted that good woman, "that when I *did* keep a general she was nothing like so neat and handy as you, Miss Burford. I've never had a lady in the Profession to touch you for those qualities."

"Remember," Allegra remarked, unmoved by the compliment, "we want tea at half-past four sharp, for three. Bring me the kettle in good time and I'll make it. No mats for the cakes, please, but clean plates—really clean."

Allegra

Mrs. Dickman stood holding the heavy tray pressed against her portly person. "If I," she said, markedly addressing herself to Miss Rendal, "hadn't seen her in love parts I'd set her down as cut out for an old maid, a regular tabby. She's a real curio, that's what she is."

"I wouldn't stand holding the tray," Allegra suggested soothingly; "it's so heavy. If you're going to discuss my characteristics, do put it down while you're doing so."

"Indeed, I've no time to discuss anything so multifarious, nor no inclination," Mrs. Dickman remarked tartly. "It's after three already, and your tea will be upon me before I can say knife. But what I've said I stand by—a reg'lar old maid and a real curio—that's what you are, Miss Burford, whether you like the comparison or not."

And Mrs. Dickman departed with a sort of torpid dignity, and left the door open.

Allegra waited till the clink of china died away in the back regions, and shut the door.

"Why wouldn't you let her put her poor little crochet mats?" Miss Rendal asked. "It pleases her, and it doesn't hurt us."

"It hurts me, for they're never clean."

"Neither are the plates—not what you call clean—and what's the good of fussing and hurting Mrs. Dickman's feelings because this youth is coming to tea? Her mats wouldn't affect his opinion of your acting. . . . You're a bit hard, Allegra . . . and need we have the window open at the bottom as well as at the top? It really is very cold."

Allegra

"Not now," Allegra allowed as she shut it; "but we had to let out the smell of Sunday beef before the Sunday muffins came in. I verily believe you think that Mr. Staniland would be better disposed towards our acting if only our surroundings are sufficiently sordid. He won't notice our surroundings; he's not that sort. You curl up on the sofa and have a snooze, Rosa. You're always worn out by Sunday. I'm going for a walk, but I'll be in by half-past four."

Miss Rendal was very tired, but she didn't curl up as Allegra suggested. She sat on where she was, in the rather hard armchair, with her feet on the fender. Her eyes were closed, but she was not asleep. She thought deeply of the "curio" who had just left her, who was going to leave her for good and all so very soon.

From the time Allegra joined the Westingley Repertory Company two years before, Rosa Rendal had mothered her. She had heard her her parts and had given her ungrudgingly advice resulting from a long and varied experience of the stage, and she had got very fond of the hard-working, clever girl. She appreciated, though she would never admit it, the order and cleanliness Allegra had, partly by her organising powers, partly by her own handiwork, imported into what had been before a very higgledy-piggledy *ménage*. She grumbled at the open windows, at Allegra's meticulous dusting, at being forced occasionally to put her own things away—though generally Allegra did it for her; yet it was pleasant to have somebody around who always knew where everything was.

Allegra

She believed in Allegra's future, but she honestly thought that another year of the admirable theatrical training that Repertory work undoubtedly gives would have done Allegra good . . . and she hated to lose her. It hurt her, too, that the girl seemed so utterly unconcerned about their parting. She had done her best to comfort Allegra when the old gentleman died who seemed the only person in the world for whom she deeply cared: "I wish he hadn't left her that money," Miss Rendal thought. "She wouldn't have done it then."

Kind as Miss Rendal always was to youngsters, she had never allowed one of them to live with her before, and Allegra had shared these rooms with her for over a year. And now she was going; going with no definite plan of campaign arranged; going simply "to better herself"; going, apparently, without one pang.

Miss Rendal's closed eyes felt hot and smarting. She had been so proud of the child; proud that she needed no make-up off the boards; proud of her plain, well-made clothes, of her quietly distinguished appearance, of her serene, self-possessed manners.

It seemed quite natural to Rosa Rendal that she, herself, should need such copious and impressionistic make-up at all times. She was used to her own face in the glass. It would have startled her to see it any different. But the very fact that she looked as she did, herself, made her enjoy Allegra's freshness all the more. She honestly and generously rejoiced in the girl's varied charm.

Two big tears forced themselves under her closed lids. She dabbed them away carefully

Allegra

with her handkerchief where the tears made two little black marks.

She shivered, opened her eyes and sat forward over the fire. Surely that window was very wide open at the top, and it had turned very cold. But she made no attempt to shut it.

The clock on the chimneypiece struck four.

She put her hands up to her hair, rose and looked in the square mirror that formed the centre of a walnut over-mantel that crowned a chimney-piece painted to resemble rose-coloured marble. Allegra would be vexed with her if she looked dishevelled.

Yes, it had got rather flat and wispy.

Miss Rendal departed to her bedroom to do her hair.

• • • • •

Never before had Paul stayed in any part of England where he had no friends. He took it for granted, and, so far, his serene faith had been justified, that wherever he went invitations to lunch and dine, to play cricket, shoot, fish, or the offer of a mount to go hunting, would drop from the clouds as a matter of course. The fact was that till now he had never penetrated into any part of the country unheralded by introductions from some of his very numerous relations. Both his parents came of large families with infinite ramifications in the shape of cousins and cousins' cousins, all very much in the same comfortable positions in life as regarded potentialities of pleasure; though differing sufficiently widely in

Allegra

their various avocations to give an agreeable diversity of environment.

Probably had he given his people due notice of his visit to Westingley the usual result would have ensued. But, purposely, he gave no warning of his intention till the day he went down, when he wrote his mother a brief note to the effect that he was to be at Westingley for the week-end on business, and giving his address at the Clarence Hotel, which, as Allegra had told him, was the hotel nearest to the Repertory Theatre.

So there he was, on Sunday of all days, in a large manufacturing town where, with the exception of Allegra, he did not know one single soul.

Saturday night was not so bad. He arrived well after six, and so had only time for dinner before going to the theatre, which, after the manner of Repertory, began early.

He had thoroughly enjoyed *Trelawny* and felt all the young thrill of pleasurable excitement that accompanies a visit "behind" when he went to see Allegra in her dressing-room.

But Sunday was deadly.

It rained in torrents all the morning, and he found it impossible to work at his play in the stuffy, though nearly empty lounge of the hotel. As luck would have it, too, he woke early and got up, and that made the day far longer than it need have been.

He had fondly hoped that Allegra would suggest his calling in the morning that he might tell her about his play and talk it over with her. But she did nothing of the kind. Instead, she very

Allegra

definitely invited him to tea at half-past four, and promised he should meet her friend Miss Rosa Rendal, whom he had seen that evening as "Miss Sylvester."

Eager as he was to tell Allegra about his play, he was far too shy and diffident to mention it unless she introduced the subject, and in their hurried interview she had been too full of her own success to talk about anything else.

Would he dare to discuss it at tea, if she gave him a lead? Would he dare to ask them about one or two technical points where expert knowledge would be very valuable?

Paul sat in that odious lounge with a blank sheet of MS. paper in front of him, cogitating these knotty points.

Finally, after what seemed hours of fruitless reflection, the clock struck eleven. The rain still poured down in torrents, and in desperation he wrote letters to all the people he had neglected for months: three uncles and five aunts among them. And he never explained to one of them why he was writing from the Clarence Hotel at Westingley, though the note-paper proclaimed the fact that he was there.

At one, he lunched in the dismal and almost deserted coffee-room. By two the rain had ceased, and he went out.

On Sunday, Westingley is not an interesting town to walk in. The famous Picture Gallery was, of course, shut. Everything was shut. The only public buildings open were the churches, and Paul did not feel drawn to enter any of the

Allegra

churches. He walked and walked: up long terraces of stately, well-to-do, severely-curtained houses; through long, straight streets of mean, poor, dismally respectable houses; through less regular streets of houses that, plainly, were not very respectable; and the further he walked and the better he became acquainted with the outward appearance of Westingley, the more did the iron of its ugliness enter into his soul—till he cursed his own idiocy in having come down one single minute earlier than his promise exacted that he should.

Finally he discovered that he had reached the outskirts and that, apparently, miles of allotment gardens, dismal in their late autumnal decay, stretched before him and on either hand. So he boarded a passing tram and went back into the town itself: and still it was only a quarter to four!

The tram terminus is in a part of Westingley called "The Square." The roads are wide and the centre space is occupied by a stone platform raised a considerable height above the ground and adorned by statues of departed worthies. You ascend to the platform by steps, and once you reach that eminence you can see three streets in perspective.

Paul decided to inspect the worthies, but paused on the top step to look north, and he perceived Allegra walking swiftly towards the Square.

He dashed down the steps again, was nearly run over by two trams, and met Allegra at the corner.

Allegra

"Oh, I have been so lonely," he exclaimed.
"What *do* you do on Sundays in Westingley?"

"I don't know what other people do; we rest mostly, but I always take the air in the afternoon because I feel musty if I stay indoors all day. Do you think it's dreadfully ugly?"

"Well, it isn't exactly picturesque, is it?" Paul asked almost apologetically. Now that he had met Allegra he felt quite kindly to poor Westingley, and didn't want to hurt its feelings.

"When I first came," Allegra said confidentially, "I thought it was the most hideous place I had ever seen, and I'd seen a good many; but now there's something about the grim strength of it that appeals to me. And it's alive, you know."

"Is it?" Paul asked incredulously. "I suppose it dies on Saturday and resurrects on Monday. It can afford to work hard during the week, for I'm sure there are forty-eight hours in its Sabbaths."

"They seem short enough to us, but then we do work, you see. I'm sorry you've been so bored; you ought to have brought Mr. Flint with you to see the show last night, then you wouldn't have been so lonely to-day."

Paul looked at her in sheer wonder and admiration of the stern single-mindedness that would have inflicted such a Sunday in such a place on a man like Flint, merely that he might see her play Rose Trelawney on the Saturday. At the same moment reflecting that, had Flint been let in for a like Sunday through any concatenation of circumstances whatsoever, there would have been

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an end of Allegra's chances so far as he was concerned.

The air was cold and fresh and, for Westingley, quite clean after the heavy rain. Allegra had a lovely colour, and her clear eyes had the same look of high purpose he had admired at Bitley. He forgot to be amused about Flint as they fell into step and walked away together.

After all, Westingley had its moments.

Miss Rendal had rewaved her hair when they arrived at the rooms. Tea was laid; there were no mats under the cakes, and the kettle was singing on the hob.

Paul asked leave to look at the pictures, and wandered round the room inspecting them. In every conceivable kind of frame, from beaded plush to fir-cones and graduated straws, were prints and photographs of the Profession: most of them ladies, and all of them autographed. Many, and these interested him most, were of a time before he was born. Madge Robertson with chignon and bustle; Miss Bateman in crinoline and embroidered hair-net, looking tragic and dignified; Mrs. Scott Siddons as "Lady Macbeth"; the Vokes quartette; jolly Mrs. Billington in a small bonnet and smooth, parted hair; Ellen Terry as "Kate Hungerford"—a rare portrait this; Maud Branscombe as a nun; and hosts of others.

"Did your—ah—hostess actually know them all?" Paul asked enviously of Allegra, as she made the tea.

"Hardly, I think. A good many were given to her by actresses on tour before there was a Reper-

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tory Theatre. I think, you know, on the whole she liked it better when she had different sets of lodgers every week or so, though in some ways it was more trouble. She thinks Miss Rendal and I are very poor-spirited and quiet—but there really isn't much time to be anything else."

"You terrify me with your impressive account of your continual labours," Paul said. "Is it really as bad as she makes out?" he asked, turning to Miss Rendal.

"I never made out it was bad," Allegra interposed before her friend could answer. "It isn't—it's delightful and absorbing, but it *is* strenuous."

"She takes it all so seriously," Miss Rendal said indulgently. "If you strike an average between her account and the lurid existence described in the average novel dealing with the stage, you'll be about right. Are you looking for copy? Allegra told me that you write."

She managed it at once. Before he could have believed it possible, Paul had confided to her that he was at work upon a play, had asked her the questions he was longing to ask, and had discussed the exact value of certain "business" that he was not sure about.

Incidentally he found time to admire Allegra's attitude to the older woman. It was perfect, he thought. She was quite equally interested in his play and showed it, but she never interrupted Miss Rendal, or set up her own opinion in opposition even when at times she very plainly disagreed.

They sat so long over tea that Mrs. Dickman came unsummoned to clear it away. She was in-

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troduced to Paul, and stood for quite ten minutes in the doorway, holding the laden tray, and dis-
coursing of the stars that had shone in her lodgings
in bygone days.

It was seven o'clock when, at last, Paul tore
himself away.

"A nice boy," said Miss Rendal, as Allegra re-
turned from seeing him out; "modest and keen.
Our side of life evidently is entirely new to him—
you can see that. After all, a gentleman has very
agreeable manners. I liked the way he talked
about his play. He never pushed it or monopol-
ised the conversation."

"That little part for me is shaping nicely. He
sees me in it—don't you think? It's a pity it's
not his own plot," said Allegra.

"I like your young gent, Miss Burford," Mrs.
Dickman remarked as she laid supper. "I always
have maintained that you sticks too close to the
profession in your acquaintance. Now, I don't say
he looks particularly oofy, but his clothes was
good—did you observe his boots? He ought to
run to some flowers and choc'lits, anyway."

CHAPTER X

PAUL and Dallas Flint were sitting well in the middle of the fifth row of stalls, and the stalls were full. So was the theatre; not packed, but comfortably full.

Cultivated Westingley likes to manifest publicly that it understands and appreciates Ibsen; that his bald realism, his somewhat pessimistic view of human nature, and his matter-of-fact dialogue, in no way blind them to his genius. Westingley is conscious that it has a good deal to say in the matter of making or marring the reputation of a play. Did they not themselves, in the person of that generous patron of the drama, the wealthy Miss Wasley, possess a dramatist of distinction? Was not her work known and appreciated in Westingley even if, as yet, was unappreciated further afield?

Indeed, Westingley felt that such distant approval mattered very little indeed, once it had set its own seal on any work of art.

Though Dallas Flint had dined but indifferently well at the Clarence Hotel, he was in a benevolent mood and was interested. Paul was able to indicate to him that the stout, rather shaggy lady who sat in the stage-box was indeed the great Miss Wasley herself, an acknowledged authority on Manx literature and traditions, and that a

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new play of hers with a Manx setting was billed to appear on the last three days of that week.

Rather to Paul's disappointment, Flint did not suggest they should remain in Westingley to see it.

When Allegra as "Nora" came tripping on with her parcels, he was almost startled. She looked so amazingly different from the girl he knew. He felt that Flint was not seeing her: and for a minute or two was anxious and unhappy. She looked so much older. She was graceful and pretty and youthful, certainly, but not the young-eyed nymph of the Bitley woods. In spite of her cheerful humming, in spite of the nibbled macaroons, she was married. A girl still, but with a woman's experiences behind her. It was extraordinarily subtle, the merest fine shade of emphasis; but it was there, and Paul was not sure whether he liked it or not. Presently he forgot the girl he thought he knew in the tormented woman he was watching. He found himself hotly hating Torvald Helmer and Rank and Krogstad.

The curtain went down on the first act with nearty but by no means tumultuous applause, and Paul turned to Dallas Flint with an eager "Well?"

"She's quite good. But so are they all. It's wonderful how uniformly good their acting is, these Repertory people. Perhaps their very uniformity of excellence makes it harder for any one of them to produce an effect. That girl makes up cleverly . . . if she's as young as you think."

"Wait till you've seen her without any make-up."

Allegra

"Probably she's so young that she's not afraid to look older than she is. She's quite right artistically. 'Nora' wasn't a schoolgirl, and she has a great pull in being young. The 'Noras' I've seen are most of them well on in the thirties, and it tells in the tarantella——"

"Ah," said Paul, "that's what I want you to see."

"Well, come out and have a smoke now. We shall need it, if we're to be tremendously thrilled presently."

Paul felt quite nervous as they took their seats for the second act. Flint had been so cool, so guarded in his comments. He seemed disinclined to consider Allegra apart from the other players; and, for Paul, her acting was so entirely individual that it swept him off his feet into a maelstrom of emotion that swamped criticism altogether. He looked about him at the audience, the composed, politely attentive Westingley audience, that appeared so wholly insensible to "Nora's" pathetic conversation with the children's nurse.

"A fig for Westingley," thought Paul, and forgot them.

Yet as the act went on he was conscious of some sympathetic tension even here. He felt real, though curiously complex, compassion for this poor netted "Nora," enmeshed in the tangle of her own lies and sophistries: by turns generous and mean; cowardly and courageous; reckless and calculating.

Her musical voice, with its ever-changing modulations, thrilled him anew.

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Then came the tarantella.

She could dance; and Flint was right—here her youth told enormously.

It was beautiful and terrible, disturbing and delightful, all at once. She was the incarnation of lissome grace. A flame blown hither and thither by the winds of impulse. At one moment fleeing from an almost tangible cold-handed terror—the next, she had floated away light and irresponsible as a fallen leaf, and mocked at fear in the joy of her twinkling feet and whirling draperies.

This time there was no question that Westingley was stirred to real enthusiasm. When the curtain went down Allegra was recalled again and again. It was her triumph, though the rest of the company shared it.

Miss Wasley went behind, loudly congratulating herself that Allegra had the leading part in her one-act play that week.

A note was brought to Allegra. She thought it might be from Mr. Flint—he would be too considerate to come behind in that interval when she had to change. Only a visiting-card was in it: “The Reverend Leonard Compson.” So he had come, after all. She had forgotten all about him. On the card was written in pencil, “When may I see you? I’m here till to-morrow afternoon.”

She didn’t want him in the least. He was out of the picture. Bitley and everything connected with Bitley were centuries behind her. But she was wholly incapable of ungraciousness. She scribbled a pencil note telling him to come behind

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after the show. She would turn him over to Rosa. Rosa was always good-natured.

The Rector of Bitley was roused to the highest pitch of ecstasy and emotion, and the experience went warm and flooding through his whole being like the sound of some splendid chorus.

There were no jarring notes in his orchestra of appreciation. The tone of the theatre was so entirely what it should be. The audience, consisting as it did of what the Rector, in his innocent egotism, called "nice people like ourselves." No fewer than four other members of the clergy were seated in the stalls.

The Reverend Leonard's hitherto rather timid hope that the stage might be looked upon as a great moral and educative force became a triumphant conviction.

He waited nervously till the theatre was almost empty, and went behind. This was a tremendous experience, both agitating and confusing. The dressing-rooms at the Westingley Repertory Theatre are supposed to be about the best arranged in the provinces. They are spacious, numerous, and open out on to a wide landing, and on this wide landing were assembled what seemed to the Rector of Bitley a great many people.

Miss Burford was there, odd and unfamiliar in her make-up; she seemed neither the young lady who had interested him so much at Bitley, nor yet the young wife whose fortunes he had just been following with such poignant concern. There was the rather plain lady who had played "Mrs. Linden," and a number of men, to whom Allegra introduced him, but whom he failed to disentangle in

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his mind. Then he discovered to his amazement that he knew one of them—young Paul Staniland whom he had met several times at Bitley. He had not noticed him in the audience. Well, well, the world is but a small place, after all.

Miss Burford's greeting was quite kind and friendly, but she was, as he put it to himself afterwards, "much occupied"; and, having introduced him hastily to several people, turned from him to talk eagerly to a keen-looking man with white hair who had certainly not been acting.

"Mrs. Linden" was apparently very tired, for she yawned several times. He found it very difficult to think of things to say, and other people seemed to find it so easy to talk to everybody but him. At last Paul took pity on him, crossed over and shook him warmly by the hand; led him apart a little and explained who all the people were. Mr. Compson began to feel less out of it, and again approached Allegra. As he reached her she had just said to the white-haired man, "Very well then; we'll hurry up. Rosa!"

And catching sight of Mr. Compson: "It was so good of you to come—so nice to have seen you—I hope you liked it. Good-night—I must go and change—Come, Rosa—they're waiting—"

And she and "Mrs. Linden" disappeared into one of the dressing-rooms.

There was nothing left for him but to disappear also. He half hoped that pleasant young Staniland would come with him, but Paul made no move. An agreeable man Paul had pointed out as "the producer" saw him out.

Poor Mr. Compson! positively bursting to

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discuss the play with some one, and no safety-valve of any kind. What could young Staniland be doing at Westingley? What was he himself doing at Westingley? What would Muriel say if she knew about either of them?

Happily, Muriel would be spared this disquieting knowledge, for she had gone to Worthing for a long week-end, and wouldn't be back at the Rectory till Wednesday.

It had been a delightful but perturbing experience, and he had quite forgotten to get Miss Burford's private address.

Anyway, Mr. Drake, the manager, and Mr. Bent, the producer, who had been so agreeable to the Rector, had every reason to be satisfied. So large was the booking on the morrow that they decided to give *The Doll's House* for the week, and the triple bill which included Miss Wasley's Manx play, was postponed till the following Monday.

Dallas Flint was hungry. He was also hospitable and good-natured, and he carried off Allegra, Miss Rendal and Paul to supper at Middleton's, the best restaurant in Westingley. They had champagne and oysters and devilled pheasant and ices. For Allegra it was a sort of sacramental banquet, an earnest of joys to come.

There she was, sitting in Middleton's for all the world to see, with this distinguished-looking, white-haired stranger on her right-hand: and with her whole heart she hoped that as many as possible did see, and, beholding, took him for a London manager.

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"You know, Miss Burford," Flint said confidentially, "your reading of 'Nora' entirely deprives the play of any didactic intention or effect."

"But ought it to have either?" Allegra asked wonderingly.

"Well, all the accepted exponents of Ibsen rather rub it in that he intended it to be largely propagandist. . . . With you as 'Nora' we are only conscious of how delightful she is, and neither her motives nor her wrongs seem to concern us—only herself. . . . A thoroughly unmoral result, eh?"

"Who wants morals," Paul interposed, "if you can get living people?"

"Oh, *I* don't, I assure you—but you do, Miss Burford, contrive to make the worse appear the better reason all the way through. Seriously, now, what do you think of her as a human being?"

"I'm afraid," Allegra said a little timidly, lifting large, rather troubled eyes to Flint's, "that I *only* think of her as a human being, not in relation to any questions at all. Is that wrong artistically?"

("Yes, she *is* quite young," Flint thought.) Aloud he said, "No, I should say it's absolutely and entirely right."

"You see," Allegra continued, still holding Flint with her grave eyes, "when I'm in it I can only see her side: don't you think such a husband excuses a great deal?"

"They *were* a set of swabs—weren't they?"

"I fancy there are a good many men like them in the world," Allegra said more lightly.

"That's where his genius comes in—we're

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obliged to allow he's right all along the line, however unpleasant it is. All the same, the world's not such a bad place, after all. . . . I hear that you are leaving Westingley after Christmas. Have you any plans?"

"Quantities of plans, but no arrangements as yet. Tell me, Mr. Flint, do you think I have a reasonable chance of an engagement if I come to London?"

"It's all very chancy, and I'm not the best man to give an opinion. You certainly deserve an engagement. You've quite made up your mind to have a try in London?"

"Absolutely. If I fail, I fail: and I'll go on tour again for a bit—though I don't like it much. I give myself three months, and if in that time I haven't got a tiny part or an understudy, or something—then I must go back to work where they *will* have me. Surely five years' training counts for something?"

"It counts for a lot: but it's a great gamble. However, as I said, you deserve to succeed, and if you let me know when you come up—if I get the chance to do anything, I will."

"That's all I wanted," Allegra said with a sigh of relief: and, turning to Paul, "Please hurry up with that play of Matthew Maythorne's, Mr. Staniland; there might be a chance for me in it."

CHAPTER XI

PAUL finished his play just before Christmas, but not before he had received several letters from Matthew Maythorne. Some of these made suggestions that Paul anathematised as "infernally silly"; others tried to arrange for the personal interview which Paul knew was inevitable, but which he kept staving off as long as he possibly could. Maythorne had asked him to lunch at his club, to lunch at Prince's, to dine at the Carlton; but, so far, Paul had managed quite politely, and with carefully stated and excellent reasons, to decline all Maythorne's invitations.

Usually the most sociable creature in the world, he had, since his return from Westingley lived like a recluse, devoting himself entirely to his play. He had a queer dread of meeting Maythorne before he should have finished it, and a deep-rooted fear that, should he be obliged to do so, Maythorne would in some clumsy way break the chain of inspiration, and force him out of the sentimental sixties, where his imagination played so happily, into the garish and practical present.

There was something in the atmosphere of his rooms at the little hidden house in Elm Tree Road friendly and favourable to the play; and in those early winter weeks he went nowhere except to exercise Simon in Regent's Park, or to the play in

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the evening. And he assiduously cultivated slim-waisted, faded Miss Julia, of the red, large-knuckled hands. She was so full of "sensibility."

From her he learned the real story of their small secluded abode, with its rosewood furniture and long-backed chairs covered with canvas worked in faded roses, parrots, and lilies.

"I couldn't speak of it to just any one," Miss Julia said one day when he had asked her straight out whether her uncle had lived there for a long time; "but you, too, read so much—you write, yourself, too, and I've always heard that literary and artistic people are not, perhaps, so severe in their judgments. . . . Of course it was dreadfully wrong . . . and we hardly liked to live here at first . . . but perhaps you may be able to find some excuses for poor Uncle Tom. . . ."

"Whatever did he do?" asked Paul, much intrigued.

"It's really rather difficult to put it into words," Miss Julia faltered, blushing and embarrassed. "My Aunt Fanny was so rigid in her views—she was all for religion and that—and he was young, a good deal younger than she was, good-looking and dashing and fond of pleasure. . . ." Again Miss Julia paused. She was standing by the table and drummed on it nervously with her fingers.

"Yes? He was fond of pleasure. . . ." Paul repeated encouragingly.

"And Aunt Fanny—mind, she was an excellent person of the highest principles—it was all such a long time ago; we were quite little girls. Well,

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as I was saying, he fell in love— Oh, I know it was very wrong—don't think I excuse him. I think it was dreadful. . . .”

“What happened?” asked Paul. “Did Mrs. Tom Stukeley find out?”

“He met this girl—I believe she was quite a nice girl then, in a most respectable position in life—and they fell in love. Oh, *how* they fell in love! People did, you know, in those days. More so than they do now, don't you think, Mr. Staniland?” Miss Julia asked rather wistfully.

“I expect they do it just the same way now,” Paul said thoughtfully; “only perhaps they contrive to hide their feelings more.”

“Well, anyway, they were crazy about one another, and of course he couldn't marry her because of Aunt Fanny; and, to make a long story short, he bought this little house for her, furnished it, and brought her here.

“Nobody knew her, nobody knew anything about it (he met her in Leamington, I believe). He'd always gone away a good deal before ever he met her. He was in a very important firm of auctioneers, you know, and used to go all about the country, and he made money on the Stock Exchange as well. And Aunt Fanny had a large fortune; and, though they had a very fine house in Lancaster Gate, he wasn't there any more than he could help, so Aunt Fanny didn't notice much difference. She was out herself a good deal in the evenings, not late, you know, but at revival meetings and services, and so on, and they very seldom dined together. He couldn't get back in

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time for her, or *said* he couldn't, and as often as not she'd have a tray and go off soon after six. They had no children, which was a sorrow to him—he was fond of children, and very kind to us always. So this Bessie Brimmel (that was her name, but you'll never mention it, will you?) kept house for him here, and I understand they were a great deal happier than they had any right to be. But it wasn't for long, poor things. She got cold sitting in that very garden outside your window there—Simon used to like to lie on the lawn when you first came—and it turned to pleurisy, and she died after a week's illness. She was only twenty."

"And your uncle? Did he tell his wife then?"

"Not then, nor for many years afterwards. She was not a noticing woman, being so wrapped up in revivals and spiritual awakenings, and all those so-to-speak *violent* forms of religion. I've always been quiet Church myself, I have."

"And he always kept on this house?"

"Always; he would never have anything touched. He used to come and sit here alone for hours, just to think about her. Aunt Fanny *did* say about the time the girl died that Tom had quieted down a good deal, and that her prayers were being answered. And then Aunt Fanny fell ill herself, and she talked over her will with Uncle Tom. She's left a good deal to Missionary Societies and other good works, but the bulk of her money she'd left to him; and when he found that out, he told her everything, because he knew she'd never forgive him and would rather leave her

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money elsewhere. So she left some of it to her own relations, and what was left went to more good works. And then *she* died. He seemed to lose heart in his business, and he lost money in investments, too, and finally he put what was left into an annuity and came and lived here all alone, with an old servant. He used to walk to the churchyard, where the 'buses stop, and sit by her grave as long as he could walk at all, and once a year my sister came for a fortnight, and I came for a fortnight, Diana in spring and me in autumn. He never would have us together."

"Did he talk about her, Miss Julia?"

"Towards the end he did, to me. Never to Diana. Diana can't bear anything that's in the least lax, you know. She was most unwilling to come and live here because there used to be an idea—wasn't there?—that it was rather a . . . skittish sort of place. But I can't say I've perceived anything of the sort myself—have you, Mr. Staniland?"

"By no means," said Paul, looking as solemn as he could. "I think," he added rather regretfully, "if it ever had that reputation it must have changed very much. The ladies one sees now usually look so very . . . domestic."

"That's just what I always tell Diana," cried Miss Julia delightedly. "Not even well-favoured, most of them, are they?"

Paul's eyes twinkled. "Not strikingly so," he admitted.

"She was," Miss Julia whispered. "Her portraits . . . one used to hang over Uncle Tom's

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bed, and the other always stood on that davenport there in the window—*her* davenport.”

“Have you got them, Miss Julia? *Do* let me see them if you have.”

Miss Julia glanced at the shut door with the air of a conspirator. “Diana wanted to destroy them after we came. She took them away, but I begged her not to—it seemed so unkind to Uncle Tom. I was with him when he died, and I put her little jewel-case in his coffin, so that no one else should ever wear her things—Diana doesn’t know. The portraits are in the bottom drawer of the davenport, with a few other things. It’s the only drawer that’s locked; we cleared the others for your literary work. Diana’s got the key on her bunch, but I could get it . . . they’re right on the top. You won’t mention it, will you?—my sister would be much displeased. I think I could unlock the drawer to-night just before your dinner; then you can look at the portraits, and I can lock it again to-morrow morning. I really must go. I hope I haven’t hindered you; I’ve talked far too long. There’s the front door. Diana has come in.”

Paul opened the door for Miss Julia. It was one of the things that made her love him, that he always opened the door for her and stood up, if she came to ask him anything, till she begged him to be seated.

That night she unlocked the drawer.

“Look at anything you like,” she whispered.
“There are several odds and ends.”

The portraits lay on the top. One was a coloured crayon sketch in a heavy gilt frame of a

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girl's head. A gentle face of the long, oval, mid-Victorian type of beauty that has become so curiously obsolete. Large, serious, light-coloured eyes with delicately marked, arched eyebrows; a straight, rather long nose; small, firmly-shut mouth, and slender neck; the fair, smooth hair parted in the middle, and brought low over the ears on either side of the round forehead. The other was a tinted daguerreotype shut in a leather case. Here, a little, slender, crinolined figure, with beautiful hands, stood arm in arm with "dashing Uncle Tom," who was tall, with luxuriant black whiskers and an expression of the most fatuous satisfaction. There was an ivory fan, a silver vinaigrette, a handsomely-bound brass-edged prayer-book—with, "From him to her," written on the front page, and a little copy of "Lalla Rookh" bound in ivory-tinted tooled leather. There were also several packets of yellowing letters tied with black ribbon, but these Paul did not touch. He looked long at the fair, girlish face. With very gentle touch he put the poor little relics back.

It was after he had seen poor Bessie's portrait that he became so conscious of an intangible, impalpable pervasion in his sitting-room, that seemed to make a shadowy claim of some sort, and was yet definitely favourable to the fortunes of his play. At such times he wondered whether some kindly ghost of the sixties did not hover beneficially about him as he wrote. There were occasions when he would have sworn he heard an attenuated rustle as of many-flounced silk skirts;

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and on the air there would be wafted a faint, etherealised but quite perceptible perfume as of Rimmel's toilet vinegar.

Simon would lift his head and prick forward his ears, but, whatever the emanation was, it did not displease Simon, for he neither bristled nor growled. And after such an experience, if so delicate and transient an impression could be called an experience, the dialogue would seem to write itself, and, reading it over afterwards, Paul realised delightedly that it *had* a flavour, that the sense of Period was there, that they were people who spoke and not puppets. And his fear of Matthew Maythorne's clumsy touch clutched at his heart so that his guarding of the play became fiercer and more vigilant.

Moreover, from a thought that it had been pleasant to dally with, Allegra's part in the play became a compelling, driving force. Yet he always remembered Flint's advice that he must keep it small and subordinate. All the more reason that every line she spoke, every scrap of her "business" should tell.

Yet with all his enthusiasm and romance, his fastidiousness and his dreams, there was a strong strain of Garsetshire shrewdness in Paul. Maythorne had not failed to rub it in as to the players he had in his mind for the leading parts in the play. Paul went to see them as often as he could, watched their tricks of gesture, the inflection of their voices, *saw* them in his characters and, above all, tried to remember their limitations. That consideration never crossed his mind with regard to Allegra.

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He didn't in the least know how it was to be managed, but he was calmly assured that she would some day act the part he had written for her.

He grudged the evenings he had to spend at other people's plays, but he was too keen on his job to neglect them. He had the ideas, plenty of ideas; he knew that. He knew, too, that he had the knack, that no amount of trying can ever give if it isn't there, of making his characters alive; but Flint had rubbed it into him that this very quality made his creations hard to play. That what he must remember is that the average actor, and even more assuredly the average actress, does not deal in fine shades, and that the unconventional type is upsetting. "Technique, technique, technique," was the watchword of Flint's counsel. "Get that and you'll do." Without it, on the stage, the greatest genius and most delicate fancy have but little chance.

So Paul studied other people's technique for all he was worth, but his happiest times were the evenings, alone with Simon, when he sat pen in hand at the round rosewood table in his little sitting-room, the room all dark except for ruddy firelight and the white circle thrown by his shaded lamp upon the table. Sometimes he wrote furiously, sometimes he sat quite still for an hour, *seeing* his play, hearing his people speak. And it was never in a theatre that he seemed to see them—it was in the environment they had chosen for themselves. Then would he feel that tender-hearted Bessie was breathlessly listening and watching with him, and that she whispered,

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pleadingly, "Oh, make them happy! Please, please, let them be happy."

Had Miss Julia known how infinitely many were the "excuses" Paul found for poor pleasure-loving Uncle Tom she would have been rather distressed. But the truth was, Paul was not much concerned about Uncle Tom except to wonder amazedly how the girl of the portrait could have cared for him so much.

Paul had never known an auctioneer intimately (it seemed an odd thing to be—but doubtless they had their feelings) and the luxuriant whiskers and the fatuous smile revolted him. That Bessie of the blue-grey eyes and spiritual expression should have cared so much seemed incredible. So he forgot poor Uncle Tom, who had lived so long and solitary, and grown old in Bessie's house.

He never came with his whiskers to watch Paul's players. She came, exquisite, enthralled, inspiring. And Paul would write on and on, sometimes into the small hours; and when at last he and Simon prepared to go upstairs together, Paul would look back into the darkened room, and quote softly:

"But when night is on the hills and the great voices
 Roll in from sea,
By starlight, and by candlelight and dreamlight,
 She comes to me!"

BOOK II

CHAPTER XII

"DO you mean to tell me you've never met Maythorne yet?" asked Dallas Flint.

Paul looked rather ashamed as he answered: "Somehow we never could fit it in . . . but I'll meet him now as soon as he likes."

Flint swung round in his revolving chair—they were in his office, and Paul was standing at one end of his knee-hole table.

"You're rather an ass, you know. . . . You've got to meet him sooner or later, and why put it off all this time? Besides, if you really want to help that Miss Burford—if you got the right side of Maythorne he might be able to do something for you with Claude Appleton, who has the giving of parts. Maythorne's good-natured, and he's pleased about the play."

"It's very extraordinary that he should be pleased," Paul said gloomily.

"My good boy—I warned you; don't say I didn't warn you."

Paul nodded. "You did, and I'm pleased, anyway. It's the most amazing piece of luck to have had it accepted and actually on the way to production so quickly."

"You may well say that. It's unheard-of luck. It's just that Appleton happened to see himself as the elderly impoverished aristocrat with the grand manner, and all that *noblesse oblige* business.

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He fancies himself in that sort of part, and he'll look well in the mid-Victorian get-up."

"What had I better do about Maythorne? He isn't offended, is he?"

"No, I don't think he's offended; he thinks you're young and shy, and probably *gauche* and afraid to meet the great man."

"I was afraid, horribly afraid, till I'd finished the play—now I feel ready to meet an army of Maythornes and be pleasant to them all. Shall I ask him to lunch at the club?"

"Ask him where you like, but do it quickly. You've put off far too much time as it is."

"But I've only just come up."

"That's what I complain of. Here's the 12th of January, and you ought to have come up directly you heard there was some prospect of Appleton taking the play—you ought to have been here to butter up Maythorne."

"But I only did hear a week ago."

"Well, I should have thought you'd be wildly excited and have rushed up at once. Don't you realise what an amazing chance it is?"

"I do realise . . . but, you see . . . it is, and it isn't . . . my play. Do tell me what to do. I want Miss Burford to have that part."

"It's no use wanting that; if you propose that, no one will listen to you, for it's as good as promised to Winifred Weir. But what you can and ought to do—seeing what we said to the girl down at Westingley—is to propose her to Maythorne as understudy, and ask for his vote and interest. He'll be flattered and may do something—then I

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come in; but I can't do anything till you drive in the thin end of the wedge."

"I'll do my best . . . but——"

"All you've got to do, anyway," Flint interrupted, "is to be humble and mindful, and take it for granted Maythorne knows all the ropes and you rely upon his vast experience and . . . excellent taste. Play up to this pose of his, and you can twist him round your little finger."

Paul made a grimace: "He wrote a very effusive letter about the play *after* Appleton had seen it—when he read it before Christmas, he was very dubious indeed, and I came near chucking back his fifty pounds at his head. He was awfully down on the title *Little St. Germain*s and wanted it changed to *Love Laughs at Locksmiths* but it seems Appleton likes the title, so it's going to be kept."

"Is Miss Burford in town yet?"

"I believe she came up a week ago."

"Well, write at once to Maythorne and arrange a meeting."

"With Miss Burford?"

"No, no, with you first, of course—then with Miss Burford."

"Why must he meet Miss Burford?"

"How the dickens is he to judge of her capabilities or appearance or anything if he doesn't meet her?"

"Shall I write to his home or to his club?"

"I'd write to his club. He's in town every day just now, full of business about the play. You never saw any one so important. Yet he talks humbly of 'my little comedy'——"

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"Confound him!" Paul ejaculated.

"Very slight, you know," Flint continued, quoting Maythorne, "but it *might* just catch the public fancy—quite a new departure for me—it wants a Meredith to do real justice to Maythorne."

Dallas watched Paul, who winced perceptibly, but looked quite good-tempered and made no further comment.

"You see," he went on, "it's like this. You dragged me down to Westingley to see that girl, and let me in for a promise to do what I could for her, so I feel bound to try—especially now there is a real chance. You seem in a dog-in-the-manger mood about her. Yes, you are; I see it plainly. You really want to help her, but at the same time you'd like to keep her sacred and secluded till she bursts on an astonished world in Maythorne's play. It can't be done. If you want a deal in theatrical matters, not only must you produce the goods, but you must blow trumpets for all you are worth."

Paul looked rather foolish, for Dallas Flint had ruthlessly laid bare a state of mind he had hardly confessed to himself.

"I'll do my best," he said humbly.

"You haven't gone and fallen in love with her, after all, have you?" Flint continued. "You haven't been seeing her lately and got entangled?"

"No, honestly; there's nothing of that sort, I assure you. I haven't seen Miss Burford since we both saw her at Westingley. She went down

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to her aunt at Oxford for Christmas, and I was with my people."

"Well, see her now; but see Maythorne first. It's quite possible he's at the Congreve at this moment. I'll ring him up, then you can speak to him and arrange something at once."

"Yes," Mr. Maythorne was in the theatre.
"Hold the line, please."

Paul sat down at the end of Flint's table and Flint handed him the telephone, with the injunction, "Be cordial, mind."

It appeared that Maythorne was ardently desirous of meeting Paul. No, he had no engagement; he'd be pleased to lunch that morning.

"Give him a good lunch," was Flint's parting injunction. "And now be off; you've wasted far too much of my time as it is."

Matthew Maythorne was big and fair, broad-shouldered and fresh-coloured in a patchy sort of way, quite unlike the even tan of men who live much out-of-doors. He affected rough, light-coloured tweeds in his clothes, and liked to be described as "burly" and "breezy." In fact, he took good care that he always was so described in the innumerable little paragraphs—accompanied by snapshots—that appeared with such gratifying frequency in the pictorial Press. His voice was rather loud and his manner hearty, and he liked to pose as a typical English country gentleman, who, by favour of the Muses, was also a successful literary genius. Genius without success wouldn't have appealed to him in the least, but he was always friendly to his brother authors, and careful

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to damn their works with a liberal bespattering of faint praise whensoever he happened to mention them. This was not often. He preferred to talk about his own (or, rather the enormous number of copies sold of his own), the amount of paper he consumed in the practice of his craft (it must have run into tons during the year), and the stiff contracts he forced upon his publishers. He was his own agent, proclaiming loudly and at length that the author who couldn't market his own wares was not far removed from a congenital idiot.

"Why should I employ a middleman?" he would demand. "If A. won't give me the terms I ask, I go to B., and if B. is so short-sighted as to haggle over a few hundreds, why then I take my book to C., who is probably only too pleased to offer me more than I asked from either of the other two. That teaches them; and I assure you C. will be so afraid of losing me he's very accommodating indeed. My output is enormous, you see. That's the way to do business. Stand up to them. Show them you know the value of your own work. If you don't, no one else is likely to."

At other times, when discussing the literary side of his craft, he would say, as he said to Paul that day at luncheon:

"I don't set up to be a high-brow. I don't go in for analytic psychology or probing into motives or things of that sort. I paint men and women, simple human beings like you and me. I go to real life for my models. There's plenty of romance and adventure in real life if you'll only look for it. Men and women, that's what I depict, and

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that, Staniland, is where your work suits me—you've realised this, you have carried out my main idea—the people in that play are human. If the play succeeds we must do others together. It may make your future."

During this harangue Paul wore what his family always called his "angel-face"—an expression they knew well as boding mischief to something or somebody. But, remembering Flint's injunction to be "humble and mindful," he said ingenuously:

"It is equally important, sir, isn't it?—to go to real life as your model, on the stage? A freshness in the conception of a part is surely very valuable? I was much struck by this in a young actress, a Miss Burford, that I saw recently in the Repertory Theatre at Westingley."

"They do good work in those Repertory companies, but they're a bit inclined to cater too exclusively for the intellectuals. It's well enough for the like of you and me, but I question if actresses trained in that school have much general appeal."

"I do wish you could see this Miss Burford," Paul persisted. "She is, I think, an unusual girl, and you, with your wide influence, might be able to give her a lift in her profession. I firmly believe that if she got her chance she would make good. I had her in my mind all the time as 'Mellory' in *Little St. Germaines*—in fact, she suggested the character."

"Oh, come," said Maythorne, "you mustn't say that—my Gladys *suggested* the character. You may, unconsciously, have written round this

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girl—I don't say you didn't—but I fear nothing can be done for her in *Little St. Germains*. Winifred Weir is to play 'Mellory', and we're jolly lucky to get her."

"Isn't she just a little . . . old for the part?"

"My dear Staniland! Old!—Winifred Weir! I daresay in actual years she may seem so to any one in the early twenties, like yourself, but as an actress she's in the hey-day of her youth; the hey-day; of her theatrical youth, anyway. Why, her name is a sure draw, and we'll have to pay her some forty pounds a week—which is heavy, considering it isn't a star part. The salary list will be awful. There aren't so many characters, but, as Appleton says, they all want playing."

"Have you fixed on an understudy for Miss Weir, sir?"

"I don't fix anything as to the cast. I have my say, of course, but it's all in Appleton's hands really. Why?—do you think this girl you mention would understudy Miss Weir?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. She left Westingley before Christmas, and is determined to get something, no matter how small, in London—because she's convinced that once she gets her foot even on the bottom rung of the ladder she can climb. I believe she's right, too."

"Where could one see this paragon?"

"I think she would be ready to meet you anywhere, if you really think you could help her. And if you do, I'm quite sure you'll never regret it. She came up to London a week ago. Of course, I don't know if she has got an engage-

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ment, but I don't think so. Dallas Flint thinks very highly of her."

"Oh, does he? That puts a different complexion on the matter. Flint knows what he's talking about. He's a shrewd fellow."

"It was he who suggested I should mention her to you," Paul said quickly.

"Well . . . well, I'd like to oblige Flint. I'll see Appleton when I get back to the theatre this afternoon. I must be getting back, too, at once, though I don't feel very energetic after the excellent lunch you've given me. Tell you what—you'd better come back with me. I don't *think* they've fixed up Miss Weir's understudy. . . ."

"It would be most kind if you would say a good word for Miss Burford."

"Appleton is hustling for all he's worth, but that mayn't be fixed up yet. He wants to put the play on by the second week in February if he can. We shall all be reduced to fiddle strings by then. You've no idea how nerve-racking it is to watch the actual incarnation of one's own mind-creations. The way of the creative artist is hard—hard—but there are compensations."

By the time they reached the theatre Paul might have posed as a model for Saint Sebastian, so angelic was his expression.

CHAPTER XIII

IN the drawing-room of a boarding-house in Montague Street, Russell Square, where a newly-lit and very black fire gave forth no heat, Allegra was sitting alone on a sofa covered with red stamped-velvet. Red is generally considered a cheerful colour, but it can, when of a particular shade and disposed in certain masses, have a most depressing effect; and in the fading light of that winter afternoon Allegra was feeling quite unusually tired and discouraged. She had spent the morning running about London on expeditions to interview managers, and they had all turned out fruitless. No one seemed to want her. Her credentials, her experience, her appearance, had failed to make any impression. The agents she had applied to since coming up persistently suggested a small part in some distantly-forthcoming musical comedy, which she, as persistently, refused. She did not know London well and had no sense of direction. Therefore had she, despite the most diligent previous study of maps, twice that morning boarded 'buses going away from her destination. In each case the conductor had been scornful, and she felt a fool as she was hurriedly cast forth. And there was nothing Allegra disliked more than being made to feel a fool.

As she looked round the comfortless room—a large L-shaped typical London drawing-room,

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with three long windows opening onto a balcony; with faded, dingy gold-patterned walls adorned by framed engravings of "The Soul's Awakening," "Wedded," and several examples of Marcus Stone—she felt much as Paul had felt that Sunday afternoon in Westingley.

It was a most respectable boarding-house, found for her by Miss Rendal. Its clients consisted mainly of lady medical students. It was cheap, central, safe, and, to Allegra, thoroughly uncongenial. So far she had not felt drawn to any of the medical students, and, as she made no mystery as to her own business there, they rather looked down upon her. Two girls who studied singing at the Academy of Music in Marylebone Road had been friendly, but they were much more eager to talk about their own prospects than hers, and she could take little interest in anything but her own affairs just then.

The fact was that, with all her energy and enthusiasm, she had not yet had much experience in making her own arrangements. Things had always come to her through people she knew, and she had so far found the world kind and eager to serve her. Any changes she had made before had been carefully arranged, superintended and approved by competent friends. This time she was acting entirely for herself, and in opposition to the advice of most of her friends, including her aunt.

At Christmas she had spent a fortnight in Oxford with her aunt, who was still in charge of Mr. Wycherley's house there. His elder ward had let it furnished for the rest of the lease, and the

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tenants were only too glad to take on so capable a servant as Mrs. Dew. The tenants had gone away for Christmas, and the other servants were away on holiday, so that she and Allegra were alone, and the girl had thoroughly enjoyed her time in the old house in Holywell Street, where she had known so much sympathy and understanding and kindness.

From time to time Mrs. Dew made caustic remarks as to the folly of throwing up a good "situation" merely "to better herself" before any other opening had been definitely found, but Allegra in her young self-confidence just smiled and changed the subject.

Perhaps it was coming straight from Oxford to Russell Square that made Allegra hate it so.

In spite of her fatigue and anxiety, she was subconsciously chafed by the presence of thick dust underneath various nondescript and unwieldy pieces of furniture set against the walls, and by the week-old cigarette-ends that reposed in a Benares bowl on a small table at her elbow.

Yet she sat on where she was, doggedly sewing Cash's red ingrain cotton names into four new pairs of stockings that she had bought that morning.

And it was thus employed Paul found her, as the frowsy housemaid who preceded him opened the door, muttered something inaudible, and stood aside to let him go in.

Allegra jumped to her feet. Stockings, little red names, scissors, were scattered about, and a reel of cotton rolled gaily right across the room.

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"Oh, I *am* so glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "I was feeling suicidal and thought you'd forgotten all about me. Have you any news? Has Mr. Flint done anything? I didn't dare to remind him myself."

Paul held the pretty hand thrust out to him so eagerly just a little longer than was necessary, as he said:

"I've budgets of news, but first tell me—have you got an engagement?"

"No; nothing."

"Would you do understudy to Winifred Weir in *Little St. Germaine's?*"

"Would I! I'd jump at it. That's the part you wrote for me, isn't it? Is she very strong? Does she never fall ill? Have you come to offer me the understudy?"

"Well, hardly that—it isn't in my power. If it were—it would be the part I'd offer you; but I believe we can work the other. . . . Appleton will see you——"

"When?" Allegra interrupted eagerly. "Now? Shall I go directly? Do take me!—is he at the theatre?"

She stooped and began hastily to gather up the fallen stockings, and as Paul helped her he answered:

"To-morrow morning, at the theatre, would be best, I think. I've just come from there now, and Maythorne has gone on to see Mr. Flint, and his good word will be valuable. Appleton and Maythorne will see you to-morrow."

"Sit down," Allegra said, seating herself on the

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sofa and patting it invitingly; "sit down and tell me everything."

"Don't you think," Paul suggested, still standing, "that it would be pleasant to go out to tea somewhere?"

"I'd love it, and I doubt very much whether they'd give us tea here; I've never been in before; I generally go to an A. B. C. or something."

"Would you like the Carlton for a change? It's rather amusing in the afternoon."

As Allegra smiled at Paul, he suddenly discovered a wholly unexpected dimple in her cheek. Before she had always seemed too grave and earnest for dimples, and as she spoke it vanished:

"I've never been to a really smart restaurant in London. I fear I haven't any Carlton-y clothes, but I'll be all the quicker getting ready."

"Hurry, then, else we shan't get a table."

She thrust the stockings into her work-bag and was gone in a flash; but she had forgotten one of the little red names, and Paul picked it up. It was marked "Allegra"; nothing more. He put it in his waistcoat pocket, and surveyed the room. He had never been in a London boarding-house before, and the type was new to him.

The fire gave a feeble gasp and went out. An aspidistra drooped sadly on an "occasional" table. The reel of cotton had rolled under an ebony chiffonier. He retrieved it and laid it on the table beside the Benares bowl, and in an incredibly short time Allegra came back, asking, "Will I do? Do I look all right?"

Her eyes were dancing and the dimple had reappeared.

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"You look," said Paul, "as if you had bought London. Come on!"

The Carlton was crowded, but they managed to find a table in a corner and not too near the band. Allegra faced the room and looked about her with pleased, interested eyes, and Paul looked at Allegra.

Matthew Maythorne, sitting with a group of friends some distance behind Paul, looked at them both. In fact, he did more than look at them, he watched them; and Allegra was perfectly aware that he watched them, and wondered who he was. It never occurred to Maythorne that the girl with Paul was that Miss Burford of whom they had been talking at luncheon. She was so plainly dressed. Well dressed, certainly; but Maythorne was convinced that only a girl of assured social position could dress like that and contrive to look so distinguished. He concluded that she was Paul's sister, for although they were not in the least alike they were both dark.

He knew—in fact, Dallas Flint, playing upon what he had long ago realised was a foible, had taken care Maythorne should know—that young Staniland's people were of good family and that his father owned some five thousand acres in Garsetsshire. The knowledge had given Maythorne satisfaction, for he cultivated ardent social aspirations. He did not confess, even to himself, that there was no lowest seat for him in the courts of Literature among the Mighty and the Chosen; but he knew it all the same. Therefore did he look to the income produced by his big sales to

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oring him an *entrée* into Society with a big "S": and was shrewd enough to see that towards that end merely smart people were of no use to him at all.

"Solid, steady, *known* people, they're the people for me," he would say in confidential moments. "There's nothing like land, after all. I know what I felt myself, though I was only a lad, when the last acre of the old place was sold."

"The old place," in his case, was a modest red-brick house in a row, on the outskirts of Bedford; where his father, who was assistant editor of a local paper, rented it for thirty-seven-pounds-ten a year. For, whatever else Maythorne may have lacked as a literary craftsman, he had a fertile imagination, and it was busily at work now. He saw himself, staying with Paul's people, charming them all, and paying special court, perhaps, to that distinguished-looking girl. He fully intended to marry again directly he found a woman who would be a real helpmate: and by that he meant one whose position and connections would open up new social vistas for him.

"Will you excuse me for a few minutes," he said to his hostess, "if I go over and speak to young Staniland?—over there in the corner—I've just remembered something I ought to have told him this morning, and it will save me a letter. He's been working on that little play of mine, you know."

The band brayed. The assembled people talked at the top of their voices, and it was exceedingly hot. Allegra, flushed and animated, was im-

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mensely cheered by what Paul had to tell her about the play; she forgot every one else, and they were so much interested in one another that neither of them noticed Maythorne till he was right upon them.

He delivered a hastily invented and wholly unnecessary message from Appleton, and as he still lingered, Paul introduced him to Allegra, who, feeling that the fates were indeed propitious that afternoon, smiled upon Maythorne even as she had been smiling upon Paul. Some people at the next table left at that moment; he seized one of the chairs and pulled it up to their table.

"Have you had tea? Will you have some more?" Paul asked hospitably, though he wished the man at Jericho.

"No, no, I can only stay a moment. Do you know, Miss Burford, I took you for Staniland's sister?"

"Why?" asked Allegra. "Do you think we're alike?"

"Not a bit . . . though there's something in the type. . . . You *are* related, aren't you?"

"In no way," Allegra said.

"Well, now, that's odd; I should have said you were, and I'm not often wrong in my deductions. The creative artist must, above all things, be observant—don't you think?—and draw inferences."

"And if his inferences are wholly wrong, as in this case?"

"We all make mistakes, even the most intuitive of us, and even one's mistakes may be turned to account. For instance, although you are not

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Staniland's sister, the fact that I thought you were suggests to me the plot of a play—or a story of the stage. . . . Yes. . . .” Maythorne closed his eyes for a minute. “I see it. I have it.”

He opened his eyes to find Allegra's fixed intently upon his face. This was what he wanted. “Which shall it be, Miss Burford? Play or novel?”

“Oh, a play, please. I like plays so much better than novels. Perhaps because I've read so many more of them. Novels always seem to me a bit long-winded. . . .”

“Not all novels,” Maythorne interrupted.

“You see,” Allegra continued, “in a play the people have to show themselves for what they are by what they say and do; in a novel the author can tell you any amount about them . . . and somehow I never believe him.”

“Then,” said Paul, “he isn't very convincing.”

“They aren't, as a rule,” Allegra said. “But perhaps,” and she turned to Maythorne with her delightful smile, “yours are—I haven't read any yet, but look forward to reading them when I have more time . . . which won't be very soon, I'm afraid, if, as I hope, you let me be understudy to Miss Weir in *Little St. Germain*s. Do you think I've a chance?”

As usual Allegra came straight to the point. Paul whole-heartedly and amusedly admired the way she dismissed the creative artist and all his works from consideration, and brought the conversation round to herself and her ambitions.

Maythorne was fairly cornered. “It doesn't

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depend on me," he said hastily, "but I'll do my best. I fear I must go back to my friends . . . but we meet to-morrow. . . . Good luck!"

He pushed back his chair, rose, stood a moment, so that any one interested might have a good view of him, and rejoined his friends.

"So that's Mr. Maythorne," said Allegra. "He's rather good-looking, and most interesting. Have you read all his books?"

"I haven't read any of them . . ." Paul began; then, seeing Allegra's look of astonishment, hastened to add: "I mean, I don't know much about them really. They've never come my way, somehow . . . but he's awfully popular."

"He has written a great deal, hasn't he?"

"Yes; he averages about two novels a year, I believe, and lots of other work besides."

"Then I expect you'll soon be dramatising another of his books. . . ."

"Never," Paul exclaimed vigorously; "never again."

Allegra looked rather surprised at his vehemence, and said soothingly: "I understand your feeling . . . but if this play is a success, it would not be quite kind—would it?—to refuse to work with him again."

Paul reddened and looked uncomfortable. "I'm not sure that I care for collaboration," he said uneasily. "Besides, it's quite likely Maythorne will prefer in future to do his own plays."

"Is he nice to work with?" Allegra asked.

"I've always found him most pleasant in every way," Paul answered solemnly.

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"You don't seem to like talking about your work," Allegra complained. "Now, I just love talking about mine."

"So do I!" Paul said heartily. "Let's go on talking about it."

"Just tell me this—do you like Mr. Maythorne?"

"I hardly know him."

"Hardly know him, and you've written a whole play with him! How long does it generally take you to like people?"

"It entirely depends on the people," said Paul.

CHAPTER XIV

THE result of Allegra's interview with Maythorne and Appleton was that she found herself actually engaged as Winifred Weir's under-study, at a salary of four pounds a week. This was not altogether satisfactory to Winifred Weir, who had suggested a protégée of her own; but it happened that Appleton was inclined to oblige Maythorne just then, and that Maythorne was disposed to fall in with any suggestion of Flint's, as he was really grateful to Flint for having sent Paul to him.

Quite unaware of Paul's real feelings, he looked forward complacently to a long line of theatrical triumphs in which Paul would successfully reconstruct, completely alter and dramatise a series of his books; while he, Maythorne, graciously accepted any *kudos* that the plays obtained. He was quite ready to be generous in the matter of royalties and—should this play be successful—even contemplated the inclusion of Paul's name as collaborator on the playbills of future productions. He was not niggardly, being quite ready to pay, and pay well, for work that was successful. He had employed a good many ghosts in his time, and they one and all agreed that he dealt fairly with them and was "safe as the Bank of England" in his payments; but he had never until now come across any real originality, nor had he expected

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it. Indeed, he had no wish for it. He knew his public and that they would suspect and probably dislike anything that necessitated the slightest mental effort or concentration. That there existed a way of writing which exacted neither to any painful extent, and yet was full of humanity, charm, and whimsicality, he also knew; but it was not for him, nor could it be produced by the aid of the most industrious ghosts.

It was just this spontaneous, elusive quality that he found in Paul's work, and he recognised it. At first sight he had resented it and the fact that the play Paul had sent him bore no smallest resemblance in structure, characterisation, or dialogue to the book it was supposed to dramatise.

For a couple of days after his first readings (for he read it many times) he was strongly disposed to send the play back to Paul, with what he called "a strong letter" pointing out that it had nothing to do with the novel it was supposed to dramatise.

But Matthew was not given to act hastily, and after much irritated weighing of pros and cons he came to the consolatory conclusion that, if Paul had chose to write a brand-new play it was none of his business. He had paid the young man to do a certain piece of work. He had not laid down any rules as to how the work was to be done, and if the form it took was novel—even surprising—that was Paul's look-out, not his.

Finally he decided to submit the play to Appleton.

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Now, Appleton had just been going through a run of bad luck. Nothing he tried seemed to run more than a month; and when this play came from Maythorne, with the intimation that, if he saw himself in the chief part, and felt inclined to put it on, the author would—to a certain extent—be prepared to back it, Appleton was tempted; and with, perhaps, a shade less than the usual shilly-shallying the contract was put through.

No other costume-play happened to be running just then. The idea was fresh and appealed to Appleton; especially as he would play the leader of the little coterie of poor, well-born Jacobites who still worshipped the attenuated ghost of a lost cause in the midst of a matter-of-fact community. Their quaint ceremonies, absurd pomp, and real pathos struck him as full of possibilities, and the leader's pride in the bend sinister of a distant ancestor particularly intrigued him. Besides, there was an ideal part for Eleanor Duval. She would play the mysterious and beautiful lady with a past who came to set the little group by the ears and put them in a flutter of prudish curiosity and jealousy. She, of course, turning out to be the dignified leader's long-lost love. The minor plot, too, in which his daughter was wooed and won by a sturdy young shipbuilder of Carlyleian views as to the Stuarts, gave scope for dialogue and situations that were pretty certain "to get a laugh."

Appleton hustled. The company was engaged, rehearsals started, and Vyne, the producer, threw

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himself heart and soul into details of every kind. Here it was that Paul came in. Maythorne knew nothing of the sixties and cared less. Paul had made it his business to know a great deal, and had chapter and verse for all his suggestions. Vyne was keen and interested and never too proud to accept his help. He and Appleton soon gathered who was the real author of the play—not from anything Paul ever said or even inferred, for he was scrupulously careful to claim nothing—but because it was impossible not to see that he realised the characters, was saturated with the period and atmosphere, and that his always modest recommendations were useful and intuitive, whereas Maythorne's were either quite commonplace or impracticable.

Winifred Weir had played *ingénue* parts for over twenty years. She was plump, fair, pretty, and a safe draw; for hers was the “sweetly feminine” type that always does everything in exactly the same way, that is invariably graceful, “nice,” and rather insipid. She made quite a “pretty” part of “Mellory,” but somehow entirely eliminated the brains and spirited disposition that Paul had hoped the character possessed.

Till he saw Winifred Weir in the part he never realised how entirely it was written with a view to Allegra's playing it, nor how much he had left to her to put in.

Winifred Weir had a way of dropping her voice at the end of sentences, so that it became almost inaudible and the words were lost. This mad-

Allegra

dened Paul, for every word in the little part was written to tell. But it was "Winifred's way," and no one found fault with it. He mentioned the matter to Vyne, who told him she was only saving her voice as much as possible, as she had had trouble with her throat.

Allegra attended all the rehearsals and watched the business, deciding in her own mind that, should she ever get a chance, she would give a very different reading of the character from that of Winifred Weir. She, however, wisely kept these thoughts to herself, and was liked by the company in general as a quiet, pleasant girl who didn't unduly push herself. She was already letter-perfect; and, in addition to the typed-out part given her by Vyne, she had the unusual advantage of possessing a typescript of the whole play, given her by Paul, and in this she made the innumerable cuts and alterations that occur in the preparation of every play.

When the play had been in rehearsal rather over a fortnight, there came a day when even the tolerant Vyne had to suggest that Miss Weir should "speak up." The weather was very cold, with sleet and a bitter east wind. Miss Weir had got a chill, and was advised to go to bed for a day or two. And Allegra took her place at rehearsals.

Meanwhile Paul had gone home for a week; for, while he was heartily admiring of every other member of the company, Miss Weir's playing of "Mellory" got on his nerves to such an extent

Allegra

that he couldn't trust himself to maintain any longer the modest though interested "outsider" attitude he had, so far, carefully preserved. He could alter nothing, and there was no use going to the theatre every day to suffer the tortures of the damned, while all the time the real "Mellory" was sitting in the theatre, absorbed, inactive, and apparently quite calmly content in her silent rôle of understudy. Only every now and then did an expression slightly contemptuous flash into her dark eyes, when Winifred Weir wholly missed the real point and expression in a bit of dialogue.

Allegra made no attempt to play the part as Miss Weir played it. She introduced certain business that she had talked over with Paul, and her beautiful voice carried to the back row of the gallery. Vyne went up there to see. Only Paul, who would have cared most to see, was not there. He had gone down to Garsetshire the day before Winifred Weir's collapse.

Miss Weir's throat was really very bad. It hurt her to talk at all, and her doctor threatened all sorts of disasters if she ventured out in the cold or strained her vocal chords in any way. When she had been away three days, Miss Duval went to see her in her charming little house in Regent's Park, and "in confidence" besought her to get well and come back as soon as possible, for the understudy was a dark horse. She could act; she was absolutely letter-perfect, and didn't seem to know what nerves were. "The wretch is so gloriously young, too," Miss Duval added enviously.

Miss Weir got up too soon. She came back to

Allegra

the theatre, to the draughts, to the fatigue of long standing about, and to the bitter annoyance of certain alterations in the business which she knew had been initiated by Allegra. The poor lady was less audible than ever, but she looked so ill that nobody said anything to her, though they said a good deal among themselves when she had gone. Appleton was worried; Vyne was very worried; even Maythorne began to doubt the wisdom of Appleton's choice; and Richard Black, who played the young shipbuilder, declared that Miss Weir's playing of the part ruined his. Only Allegra said nothing. She went back to her watching as calmly as she had taken Miss Weir's part when required to do so.

Next day Miss Weir was absent again. She sent word that she was still very hoarse, and the first night of the play was advertised as ten days hence.

The theatre was full of rumours.

Miss Weir's doctor insisted on a second opinion about her throat, and a specialist was called in. The specialist was even more pessimistic than the doctor, and told her roundly that she had got acute laryngitis, and that, if she didn't give her throat a good long rest, the vocal chords would never recover, and she would lose her voice for good and all. Poor Winifred Weir cried for the greater part of a day and night, and, as the doctor had predicted, lost her voice entirely.

Even Miss Duval, who was loyal to her friend, saw that the game was up. What was to be done?

There was no hope that Winifred Weir would be

Allegra

able to play the part for six or eight weeks at least. No other suitable "star" was disengaged just then. Appleton, Vyne, and Maythorne held a solemn conclave.

Dared they risk the understudy in the part?

CHAPTER XV

FOR the first few days he was at home Paul succeeded in partially forgetting the play. He had two days' hunting, went rabbit-shooting on the day between, and was so tired at night that he slept without the constantly-recurring dream of sitting in front at a performance of *Little St. Germaine* in which the entire company had lost their voices, there were only five people in the stalls, and they were manifestly "paper." Then came an end of the open weather, and he began to worry again.

He and his sister, Lucy, had gone for the night to a dance in a neighbouring country house, and—a very rare thing this—the Squire and his wife were alone for the evening, and were sitting over their coffee by the study fire.

"Do you think Paul has anything on his mind?" his mother asked. "He's fearfully thin, and is feverishly energetic one minute and lymphatic the next. When he first went back to town after Christmas he wrote as if he was so pleased about that play, but now he seems not to care to hear it mentioned. . . ."

"Perhaps he cares about it too much to want it mentioned," the big squire suggested.

"It's all so mysterious. Why is he, of all people in the world, mixed up with that dreadful Mr. Maythorne? It's a book of his that Paul's drama-

Allegra

tised, isn't it? I didn't think educated people ever read his books—and Paul . . . who was always talking about style. Can you understand it, Henry? Do say something."

The Squire laid his coffee-cup on the table, selected a cigar, cut the end, very carefully lit it, got it going, and said slowly: "I think I understand to a certain extent, but the situation is a bit complicated; the boy light-heartedly undertook to do something that has turned out harder than he expected. He told me all about it, and asked for my advice. . . ."

"Do you mean that he couldn't dramatise the book?" Mrs. Staniland interrupted. "Surely it would have been quite easy to say so. But I understand he has done it, and that they're going to act his version—so what is there to be mysterious about? First of all, when I asked him to get me Maythorne's book, so that I could see what his play was about, he begged me not to read it, not to ask which it was; only to wait and come up to see the play. He was so keen we should come up for the first night—now he doesn't seem to care whether we do or not."

"Well, you say yourself, you know, you wouldn't care for Maythorne's books, so why want to read one?"

"When my own son has made a play out of it—surely that makes a difference! I begin to think the critics and people must have been too sniffy about Mr. Maythorne. Probably he's far better than they make out; and I want to see for myself."

"You're curious, my dear, that's what you are:

Allegra

and yet you may trust Paul. He knows your tastes. Why, you and he are the only literary ones in the family: he gets it all from you, certainly nothing from me. Why not trust the boy, and leave well alone?"

Mrs. Staniland sighed. "I hate mysteries, and ever since this playwriting began there has been nothing but mystery. What was he doing at Westingley? And what possessed him to write to so many relations when he was there, and not to us? I've had no peace since with questions as to why Paul was at Westingley, and I can't tell them more than that he had gone down to see a play. So odd to go to *Westingley* from London to see a play!"

The Squire smoked in silence for a minute; then he said: "You may as well get it off your chest, my dear; voice your suspicions, and you'll feel better."

"Ah! then you think the same . . . it *is* that girl."

"What girl?"

"The Westingley girl, whose acting he admires so much—it's not the play that's worrying him; it's that."

"What?"

"Why, that he's in love with her. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I do hope he won't marry her. I'd rather he'd never seen a theatre than anything like that should happen. One might have guessed it would lead to something of the kind. He wouldn't be a bit happy, you know."

Mrs. Staniland was fifty, but sometimes she

Allegra

looked a good fifteen years less. Her admirable figure was tall and slender as a girl's; she had kept her fresh complexion, and her abundant, beautiful fair hair was only flecked with grey. Good health and a serenely happy life in easy circumstances are wonderful conservers of beauty. Used as he was to her, the Squire admired her as she leant forward in her chair, so eager, so worried, so good to look upon.

"I think you rather jump to conclusions about Paul," he said slowly. "You must remember that all his life imaginary things have meant a lot more to him than to most of us. From what he said to me I gather that somebody in that play doesn't fulfil his conception of the character, and that's what's at the bottom of his worry. It's no use telling Paul that it was bound to happen, that he'll never get any set of people who'll come up to his standard of what acting ought to be. He always *has* believed in the impossible ever since he was a tiny little chap, and he'll go on believing till time knocks it into him that miracles are over-past."

"Poor Paul!" Mrs. Staniland said softly. "I'd hate him to be disillusioned. He always thinks such nice things about people."

"Perhaps he'll be less disillusioned than we expect. After all, folks have a way of coming up to the scratch if you show you believe in 'em. They're rather like horses that way."

Mrs. Staniland sat and looked at the fire; her hands idle, the stocking for the Squire that she had been knitting lay unheeded on her knee.

Allegra

Presently she took it up and started knitting very fast, as she said quietly: "Thank you very much, Henry, for reassuring me while you tell me nothing whatever. *You* know all about it, whatever it is, because you always do know everything about Paul. I suppose I must wait the pleasure of you both, but I'd just like *you* to know that I'm perfectly aware that there *is something*."

The Squire laughed: "You're right, mother; but it isn't anything about the girl yet; and what it is doesn't concern either of us really, and it strengthens the boy's hands that as few people should know as possible. He's done nothing wrong, only he's got himself into rather a difficult position. About the girl I know as little as you do, but my own feeling about these things is that the slightest opposition, even a veiled opposition, may precipitate things. Undesirable attachments have a way of fizzling out if they're left alone. If he's really keen on this girl and wants us to know her, then we'd better ask her down and have a look at her—"

"Ask her down here! . . . What about Lucy?"

"Lucy is a jolly sight better able to take care of herself than Paul, any day. Lucy sees the world as it is. It's been a pleasant place to her so far, but she knows it isn't so for everybody. You needn't worry about Lucy."

"I don't 'worry' exactly, but I confess I'm 'puzzled.' "

"We always have been, my dear, over that boy—but, thank God, he's fond of us and not afraid to

Allegra

talk about his friends. After all, that's what counts with children, don't you think?"

Mrs. Staniland nodded thoughtfully. "I believe you're right," she said; "it might be very enlightening for Paul to see that girl in a different setting."

When Paul left London he was feeling that the tide of circumstance was getting too strong for him, and that at any moment he might be washed up on a shore where he had no desire to land. He was bitterly disappointed in Winifred Weir as "Mellory," and the failure of his hopes was the more poignant in that no one else seemed to share his chagrin: not even Allegra herself. All along he had been buoyed up by a firm belief that Allegra was destined to play that part. He didn't quite know how it was to come about, but he indulged in a scarcely-confessed hope that when Appleton and Maythorne saw Allegra they would be as convinced as he was that she was the only possible "Mellory." They had seen her. Appleton had taken up her credentials. . . . Winifred Weir had got the part, and for Paul the play was ruined.

He was beginning to be worried, too, about his own position as regarded the play. Appleton and Vyne, and even Richard Black, had got into the way of discussing things with him rather than with Maythorne, and he dreaded always lest he might seem to take too prominent a part, or seem to claim the play as his own. He had no idea that they all three saw perfectly well how the land lay. He was sensitive for the so-called "author," and afraid lest any innocent betrayal on his part might

Allegra

injure Maythorne. For—in spite of his affectations, his smug appropriation of work that was not his, the extraordinary obtuseness of his perceptions as to points of honour that shone star-like in the firmament of other people—there was something about the genial Matthew that he couldn't altogether dislike.

For one thing, Matthew liked him. That was patent to everybody, and all his life Paul had been the friendliest soul alive. It was impossible for him to repulse any one who showed a desire to deal kindly by him. To him there was something rather pathetic in the way Matthew took it for granted that a long and prosperous literary partnership lay before them. Besides, he had been helpful and accommodating about Allegra. He had obtained for her the "thinking part" Paul resented for her so intensely. Maythorne's speech and manner revolted him a hundred times a day, yet he couldn't entirely avoid him, and, above all, he wanted to play the game. At the same time he felt a great desire to spread out the whole situation before the eyes of some one whose discretion he could absolutely trust. Therefore he went home to his father.

There never was a man who received more confidences than the big Squire; nor one who, except from his own people, desired them less. He was the least inquisitive of mortals and one of the most reticent. It was, perhaps, because people were so absolutely sure that he would never speak of their affairs to anybody else that made even slight acquaintances so eager to consult him. Moreover, he extended this reserve even to

Allegra

his own family. The children all knew that what they told their father they told to him alone. That through him it would reach no other member of the family, even their mother: and this made confidence extraordinarily easy.

The first night Paul got home he kept the Squire up till after midnight, telling him the whole thing.

"It seems to me about as dangerous to renounce a play you have written as to claim one you haven't," he said at last. "You're just as apt to land yourself in some mess."

"So I should say," the Squire remarked thoughtfully. "You see, in either case you're in a false position."

"But you see that I can't do anything, don't you, father?"

"You certainly can't do anything that would give the other man away. You sold your work to him absolutely. You must abide by your bargain. Curious chap he must be, though."

"You see, don't you, why I can't feel particularly cock-a-whoop about it, even though it is going to be put on?"

"Yes, I see that. All the same, I don't see why you shouldn't get as much good out of it as possible. I know nothing about these things, but I suppose it can't fail to teach you a lot?"

"Oh, it's invaluable in that way; but the awful thing is, poor Maythorne expects me to go on writing plays for him."

"Well, that's nonsense, of course. You've had your lesson; you'll never put your head into such a noose again. . . . I rather wonder at Flint. . . ."

Allegra

"No, father. He's not a bit to blame. He wanted to do me a good turn, and he has. He could never foresee all the complications that might arise. In fact, I believe he got me the job as a bit of practice, and never dreamt the play would actually be placed for years, if ever."

"Well, there's nothing for you to do but to keep quiet, and be firm on another occasion."

"Had I better tell mother and Lucy?"

"That's for you to decide."

"I'd like you to tell me what you think."

"Well," the Squire said slowly, "if you really wish to do the straight thing by your bargain with Maythorne, I think I wouldn't say anything. Women are apt to be a bit indignant about things—and when they're indignant no power on earth can stop their tongues. Your mother is the least talkative of women . . . but she's proud of your literary tastes, and if she thought any one had bested you . . . Well, you know what a nice woman is where her own sons are concerned. Bless them! we wouldn't have them any different for the world: but they never see quite eye to eye with us in matters like this. You and I can be content just to see what *you* ought to do, and leave it at that. But they'd see even more clearly what *he* ought to do, and there might be the dickens to pay—see?"

"I see," said Paul.

Paul and Lucy got back from the dance just before lunch. Their mother met them in the hall; and when Paul had kissed her, he turned to his

Allegra

letters, which were lying on the round oak table. Beside them was an unopened telegram.

"It came about ten minutes ago, dear," his mother said.

Lucy was tall, and even fairer than Mrs. Staniland, but bigger made, with something of her father's square strength. She was like her father, too, in face; with large, trustworthy grey eyes and a very firm chin. But when she smiled—and Lucy often smiled, she found life so pleasant—her face was irradiated by a sort of soft sparkle that was irresistibly attractive. Children and animals, all old and most young men, adored Lucy. She was one-and-twenty, and, as Mrs. Staniland would rather sadly declare, "didn't want to get married one single bit."

"What's the matter, Paul?" she asked of her brother, who was staring at the open telegram in his hand as though he were hypnotised.

At her words Paul gave a gasp, then jumped and pirouetted about the hall, waving the telegram above his head as he almost shouted: "She's got the part, she's got the part! You must all come up for the first night!"

"What does it say? What has happened?" Lucy cried, catching his arm and pulling down the telegram to read it aloud: "Miss Weir too ill to act for some time. I play 'Mellory.' Please return at once.—Allegra."

"Must you go?" his mother asked.

"Go! I should rather think so! I must catch the 3.15 at Garchester; and you, Lucy, can motor me in."

Allegra

"I feel a bit sorry for that poor Miss Weir," said Lucy.

"A rest will do her good," replied the callous Paul.

CHAPTER XVI

ON arrival at Paddington, where it was raining heavily, Paul did not drive to the theatre, as he guessed Allegra would not be there. There were still two sad expiring nights to run of Appleton's last failure, so he told the taxi-driver to go to Montague Street. He hoped to find Allegra and perhaps take her out to dinner, bring her back early, and go on to his rooms. He had telegraphed from Garchester to Miss Stukeley that he would get back between nine and ten. When they reached the boarding-house he kept the taxi. On enquiry, a rather surly maid informed him that Miss Burford "had left."

"Could you give me her address?" he asked.

No, she couldn't; it wasn't allowed.

Paul was intensely annoyed. He had not rushed up to London just as the frost was breaking to be balked of seeing Allegra that night. The surly maid was about to shut the door in his face when he asked sternly: "Is your mistress at home?" He had no idea of the lady's name.

"I think she's engaged," she muttered.

"Kindly take her my card and find out." And Paul walked into the hall.

"Please step this way," the maid said, a shade more politely.

Paul stepped through the narrow hall, with its hat-rack and ornamental drain-pipes filled with

Allegra

umbrellas, into a little back room, where she switched on the unshaded light, to show a writing-table covered with account-books and bills, three chairs, and an unlighted gas-stove.

Here he waited several minutes. At last a faded lady appeared, holding his card in her hand, looking puzzled and very tired.

Paul met her with the childlike confidence that from his youth up he had found disarming even to irate farmers when they discovered him trespassing, and explained his presence.

"Are you a relative?" asked the tired lady.

For an instant Paul, remembering Maythorne's assumption, was tempted to proclaim himself Allegra's brother, but he said truthfully: "Unfortunately, no; but I am much interested in the play Miss Burford's to appear in—and she wants to see me about it. I had a telegram from her this morning."

"So she has got the part, has she? She told me she was to be understudy. I'm very sorry, but I have unfortunately mislaid her address—it was somewhere Baker Street way—one of those side-streets. You see, Miss Burford was only a bird of passage. There was no question of her staying permanently. We don't take young ladies who have to be out late . . . habitually. She left three days ago."

"But what about her letters?"

"No letters have come for Miss Burford since she left. But if they do come, I shall send them to the theatre. She told me it was the Congreve.' Probably they'll know her address there."

Allegra

"I suppose I should have gone there myself at first; I must apologise for troubling you."

The lady bowed. Paul bowed. She saw him down the passage and shut the door upon him.

He told the man to drive to his club.

Nothing would induce him to ask for Allegra's address at the theatre. He had no notion why the idea was so repugnant; but it was.

There were several letters for him at the club, and among them one in the small, clear, upright writing that he always felt was so characteristic of her.

"I have an idea," it ran, "that the telegram I am going to send will bring you, and that you will go to your club first. I've had a wonderful piece of luck. Richard Black knew of a girl just going on tour, who has two rooms in this house that she had furnished herself, and she has let them to me for two months at the unfurnished rent. They're central, cheap, and the people will get me breakfast and supper, and keep them what they call clean for me. I long to know your views as to what 'Mellory' is like, and I want to tell you mine. I love the part, and the minuet is a joy. Come round to-night if you can, and we'll talk it over. I shall be in all evening. Besides, I want you to help me move some furniture."

Paul stuffed his other letters into his pockets unopened and ordered dinner.

Allegra had got two rooms on the top floor of a tall, narrow house in Paddington Street. They were really a bedroom and dressing-room, with a door between so that they made a little self-con-

Allegra

tained flat. Both rooms had gas-stoves with slot meters. Her predecessor had used the larger of the two (neither was really large) for a sitting-room, but when Paul arrived he found Allegra, shrouded in a large bibbed apron, dismembering the bed, with the greater part of the decidedly gimcrack furniture collected at the side of the room.

"You see, it's like this," she said, as usual going straight to her point without tiresome preliminaries; "I'm out most of the day, but I shall be here all night, and I want as much air as possible. The window of that back room looks out on the back of another house, so close you could almost touch it. Here, at all events, I have the street between me and the other houses; so I'm going to sleep here and make the tiny room my sitting-room. Do you understand beds? Mrs. Wingfield—that's my landlady—has lent me a key, but it seems very complicated."

It was. Paul took off his coat to it, and between them, after about an hour's hard work, they got it moved and set up. The other pieces of furniture were child's play in comparison, and the little room only held a table, a couple of chairs, a very rickety sofa, and a small bookcase that contained only three sevenpenny novels. The late tenant had evidently found little time for reading. Allegra had already taken down the pictures, put them in the cupboard (there was a shallow cupboard), and swept the walls, which were, she proudly pointed out, covered with a perfectly plain lavender-coloured paper. The chintzes were

Allegra

mauve and black, and the carpets—sad, worn little carpets—had once been mauve, too. Evidently the late tenant had felt that mauve expressed her. The two cushions on the sofa were black. Allegra gave hers a spiteful thump when at last they sat down, saying: “I haven’t had time to re-cover these, but black things in London are too dreadful: think of the dirt they conceal and never show.”

“At all events, no one can accuse me of concealing my dirt,” Paul said, holding out his black hands towards her.

“I’m sorry I can’t invite you to wash them,” Allegra said; “but I want all the water there is when I go to bed, and the only tap is downstairs where the bathroom is. I daren’t run up and down too much, lest they should object to me; one makes such a noise on bare boards. I couldn’t move the furniture before, because of the gentleman below; but he’s out to-night, so it was a good opportunity. And now, tell me, why did you rush off like that?”

“Because I couldn’t stand poor Miss Weir’s ‘Mellory.’”

“If you’d waited another day you’d have seen my ‘Mellory’!”

“I couldn’t know that. My nerves were gone to pieces; I’d have been rude if I had stayed. Did she collapse for good just after I left?”

“No; I took her place for two rehearsals, then she came back.”

“Then I’m glad I wasn’t there.”

“I wish you’d told me you were so worried. I was never in the least anxious. I *knew* I should get that part.”

Allegra

“You knew?”

“Yes, I was calmly certain of it, from the first time I heard her say her lines.”

“But how?”

“When you’ve been on the stage five years you know something of throats, and when a voice is about done for. She ought to have rested it long ago. It was silly for her to undertake the part at all.”

“I suppose she’s quite well off?” Paul asked. He was so glad to be rid of poor Miss Weir, he felt rather guilty.

“Oh, dear, yes; she’s got a beautiful house in Regent’s Park, a Willett house, and a husband. He’s the third, I think; but this one isn’t a waster; he’s something affluent on the Stock Exchange. You really needn’t worry about her.”

“Then we won’t worry. Tell me about you. How do you like the part? How does it go?”

“Mr. Maythorne says I’m a ‘lyric, an incarnate lyric.’”

“Does he indeed?”

“I wonder what you will think?”

“Probably much the same, and for quite different reasons.”

“He says I read the character exactly as he created her.”

“The deuce he does!”

“Mr. Staniland, tell me,” and Allegra held him with her clear, searching gaze, “why don’t you like Mr. Maythorne?”

“I hardly know him, but I don’t dislike him.”

“You said that before, and it’s no explanation. I think he’s ever so kind and jolly.”

Allegra

"I'm sure he is."

"And he likes you most awfully. He's most generous in what he says about *your* work."

"He would be," Paul said dryly.

"Some Sunday soon," Allegra continued, "he's going to bring the motor in for me and take me out to spend the day at his country house. Then I shall see his little girls. It would be nice if he asked you too, wouldn't it? He's going to have us all out there——"

"The whole company?"

"Not all at once, of course; but he's very hospitable, one can see that. And he's so ready to take trouble for one. It was very good of him to bother about me and get me these rooms."

"I thought you said Black told you about them."

"Yes, but Mr. Maythorne told Richard Black about me."

"You think you'll be comfortable here?"

"I'm sure of it . . . you see, it's my own little place. I couldn't have borne another week in that boarding-house. They munched so at meals, and the tablecloths *were* so grubby. And the bath . . . oh, that bath was horrible!"

"Tell me," said Paul, "is it a myth, the universal belief that the artistic temperament—above all, the dramatically artistic temperament—is oblivious of dust and dirt and general muddle? You shatter the whole fabric of my preconceived ideas. If I may say so, you're as fussy about all that sort of thing as our old nurse."

"Probably because from twelve till eighteen I lived with some one much of her type. If I

Allegra

splashed any gravy on the tablecloth when I had meals with my aunt, she hit my hand hard with a tablespoon. First I disliked the tablespoon, and then I grew to dislike the stains. I don't think theatrical people *like* dirt and disorder; but they're often very poor, and can only afford to live where these things are taken for granted, and they've very little time to see to things themselves. You've no idea how costly it is to be clean in London . . . or any big town."

"Yet very poor people often are . . . in the country."

"It's easy to be clean in the country."

"And you won't be lonely here?"

"Have I much time to be lonely? You've no idea how refreshing a little solitude can be when you're with a crowd of people all day and a good part of the night."

A little clock on the mantelpiece struck ten.

"Good heavens!" Paul exclaimed, "I must fly; I had no idea it was so late."

Allegra rose at once. She made no effort to detain him. She was very tired, and what she had wanted done was done. She ardently desired him to go now, for she had to make her bed.

"I'm very grateful to you for helping me to settle things," she said. "Be careful of the stairs. They're rather dark and curly. Rehearsal at eleven to-morrow, mind. Good-night—and give my love to Simon."

"Simon is down at home. I left him with my people, for I felt it would be hard on him this week, when I shall be out so much."

Allegra

"*You are* glad about me, aren't you?"

Allegra still wore the apron. Her hair was rather ruffled. She had a long black smudge across her cheek. To Paul she was irresistibly appealing.

"Glad!" he said. "I'm much more than glad. I'm happy and glorious and joyful and triumphant and so supremely thankful I'd endow a hospital if I had the money."

"Good-night, Mr. Staniland, and mind those stairs."

It had ceased raining when, the stairs safely negotiated, Paul found himself in Paddington Street. His dirty hands still ached and tingled from his battle with the bed, but his heart was singing. Surely she must like him a little, must feel safe with him, that she had asked his help in such homely, intimate matters. He was poignantly aware of the pathos of those poor little rooms, with their cheap furniture that tried so hard to be artistic. Coming fresh from the space and graciousness of his own home, they struck him as quite dreadful. He so wished she could have lived in a nicer place, but it was near Baker Street, and from Baker Street she could go up and down quickly and easily to Piccadilly Circus. The street seemed quiet, too, at night. He shuddered as he thought of Allegra coming home alone at night; yet he was quite assured that she was admirably capable of taking care of herself.

He picked up a taxi in Marylebone Road, and as it slid into the traffic he laughed, for the con-

Allegra

viction was borne in upon him that Allegra had wired for him to move her furniture, and for no other reason. Certainly there had been but little said about the play. He was filled with a rueful admiration for her intuitive selection of the shortest way to any goal she had in view, and wondered was she destined always to get there with such celerity.

Quite frankly he asked himself the question that his mother at home was just then propounding to Lucy: "Was he in love with her?"

He thought not.

He saw her too clearly; her unveiled egotism, her determination to get that upon which she had set her heart, a certain hardness and lack of imagination where other people were concerned. The mysterious Princess of the Bitley woods—aloof, unapproachable, divinely distant from ordinary doings—had gone back into the land of dreams. For the moment the girl in the apron, with the smudge on her cheek, had banished her. But none the less was he tenderly admiring of that girl's pluck, her enthusiasm, her sturdy love of order and cleanliness for their own sakes. Above all did he admire what made her companionship so easy, so entirely without embarrassment for either of them.

He did not realise that it was just because Allegra was keenly aware of certain qualities in him that made her so much at ease in his society.

"If I'm in love with anybody it's with 'Mellory,'" thought Paul.

As Allegra made her bed that night and buttoned

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on the linen pillow-cases her aunt had given her, she remembered how Rosa Rendal had said: "After all, a gentleman has very agreeable manners."

CHAPTER XVII

PAUL had not been near the Congreve for ten days, and when he appeared for the rehearsal that Friday morning he was quite touched by the friendliness of every one. Matthew, in the breeziest of Harris tweeds, was already there, and his greeting was boisterously warm. As they sat together in the darkened theatre at the back of the stalls, waiting for the rehearsal to start, he poured forth a stream of comments and confidences. The play was "great, unique, immense. Appleton was delighted. Miss Duval was not quite so delighted, though she'd got a top-hole part. Richard Black had come on most wonderfully." Then in the same breath he expostulated on the "slightness" of the theme, and warned Paul not to expect too much.

"And what about Miss Burford?" asked Paul.

"Ah!" Matthew took a deep breath and let it go again with an impressive falling of his broad chest, and said solemnly: "She's a lyric." Here he paused and looked at Paul for admiration at the aptness of his phrase. "An incarnate lyric."

"She told me that was what you said about her," Paul remarked rather spitefully.

"She did? She remembered my words. She would. For she has the most delicate appreciation of fine shades. Wait till you see her."

"I am waiting most impatiently. Why the

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dickens don't they begin? I thought the rehearsal was for eleven."

At last, at a quarter to twelve, they actually began. And Paul, accustomed almost entirely to amateur shows, was amazed at the smoothness with which the whole thing ran. Last time he saw the play people still carried their parts in their hands, and the setting was more or less sketchy. Now, the carefully thought out "props" were in their places. All that gave atmosphere and Period had been collected; and, though the performers were still in their twentieth-century clothes, it didn't seem to matter. Their minds were the minds of the sixties, and Paul's mind seemed to see them in their mid-Victorian dress. The finish, the quickness, the indescribable *élan* of a first-class London company carried the thing with a sort of easy triumph.

It was little short of rapture for Paul to see the play produced like this.

And "Mellory"?

"Mellory" was all and more than he had dreamed and hoped as the play grew under his hand in Bessie Brimmel's little sitting-room in Elm Tree Road.

No more straining to catch the ends of sentences.

No longer any question that the girl had wit and fire and character, tenderness and strength.

The minuet that "Mellory" danced with her father's old friend was for Paul a delightful realisation of his visions in Elm Tree Road. She was so decorous, so dainty, so strong in the grace and honour of her youth. The easy vices and mechanical

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habits of musical comedy had not yet touched Allegra. She had kept herself clean of the commonplace. Yet no musical comedy star was ever more sensitively conscious of her effect than she was, and the effect she contrived to produce here was that she danced because she loved dancing, as she assuredly did.

But Miss Duval laid her finger on the chief reason for Allegra's charm when she said: "The wretch is so gloriously young, too."

Miss Duval herself was fine and subtle. She moved with a large, deliberate grace, and always carried with her a sense of romantic mystery; and hers was the important story in the play. For this reason she was not the best pleased that Allegra should show so much marked individuality; "she threw the thing out of focus," she said. So annoyed was she that she tried to persuade Appleton to cut out the minuet, saying that it was redundant, a jarring note out of key with the rest. But here Vyne was firm. The public likes a dance, he declared. It was quaint, too; he'd never seen it done with crinolines. No, it couldn't come out. Arkwright (who played the old gentleman who danced with "Mellory") fancied his dancing. He'd be awfully rusty if it were cut out.

Not a word about Allegra.

Miss Duval was precious, and must be propitiated in every possible way, but they weren't going to spoil the show just because she was annoyed that this unknown girl could act.

Allegra herself knew perfectly well that Miss Duval was annoyed. Perhaps she was a little bit

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pleased that Miss Duval should be annoyed, because it showed that she, Allegra, was not a non-entity. But she appeared quite unconscious of any controversy. She was friendly and approachable to any one who happened to talk to her; but she made no advances herself, and always left the theatre directly she was sure she would not be wanted again that day.

The dress-rehearsal carried Paul's enthusiasm to a height that was perilous. He lived in and for the theatre till the actual day of production. Then came the inevitable reaction. That day he never went near the Congreve. He became a prey to the most devastating dreads and qualms and misgivings. After all, as Maythorne was never tired of saying, the thing *was* very slight. Probably much too slight. Perhaps the small doings that had so pleased him—the little ironies, the fragile pathos, the humour that altogether depended on an appreciation of somewhat subtle contrasts—were all too shadowy and delicate to please the usual London audience. Paul became certain that none of it—nothing—would ever get over the footlights. Probably the very incidents that seemed quaint and amusing to him would seem only silly to a robuster taste.

He wandered about Regent's Park in the wet. He longed unspeakably for Simon. Simon, who always understood. He told Miss Stukeley he would lunch out, and then forgot to lunch at all. Never was there a more miserable being than was Paul throughout that long, long day.

At last it dragged itself towards evening, and at

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five o'clock he went to Paddington to meet his mother and Lucy, who were coming up for the first night. The Squire couldn't come, as it was his day on the Bench. He would come later on.

His mother was shocked at his appearance: "My dear boy, what have you been doing to yourself? You look utterly worn out."

Paul smiled the wan smile that was all the welcome he could muster, and, leaving Lucy to collect the luggage, took his mother's arm and walked down the long platform with her, talking into her ear very fast. "I'm in the most awful funk, mother; that's what's the matter. It will probably be a regular frost; you'd better be prepared. I almost wish you hadn't come up. I'm sure it won't be worth while, except to see the acting. That's first-rate, but I'm terrified about the piece. . . . And Maythorne has put such a lot of money in it."

"Well, then," Mrs. Staniland remarked with cheerful common sense, "it's probably quite all right. From what I can gather, he's very shrewd, and he'd never write anything likely to be unpopular. He knows his public too well. And even if it isn't such a great success, I don't see why you should mind so much. You can't blame yourself. It isn't as if you'd had a free hand."

"Oh, but I had," Paul groaned.

"Nonsense," she said firmly; "you couldn't have with another man's work. Anyway, I'm certain it will be all right, and we wouldn't have missed it for anything. Where's Lucy? Hadn't you better go and help her with the things?"

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Paul dined with them at the Berkeley, where they were staying, and discovered that he was ravenously hungry. His mother ordered champagne and gradually hope, like a little weak new moon, began to shine in on the darkness of his doubts. They were so cheerfully optimistic, these kind people of his, and he was proud of them; they looked so handsome, so entirely well turned-out, and were so reassuringly confident.

After all, there *was* another world besides that in which, for the last week, he had been living with such intensity.

Of course, he hustled them over their coffee and they reached the theatre very early; but his mother and Lucy didn't mind that. They had neither of them ever been to a first night before, and were keenly desirous of knowing who everybody was.

Paul decided it was a good first night, because all the critics were there before the curtain went up, and a great many influential first-nighters whose good word, if obtainable, would be very valuable. Flint was there, with his wife, far back in the stalls.

"Who are the little girls in the box opposite just to the right of the stage?" Lucy asked. They were sitting in a box rather high up.

Paul looked. Two little girls with short curly brown hair and rosy faces, and a lady with strong, plain features and the sort of complexion that looks as if it had been scrubbed with yellow soap and polished assiduously, sat in the front. At the back he saw Maythorne, all white waistcoat and fob, looking very cheerful indeed.

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"I think they must be Maythorne's little daughters," he whispered. "Anyway, he's there at the back of the box."

Lucy levelled her opera-glasses, and Maythorne, much to his gratification, saw her do it.

That was Staniland's sister this time, he was certain. He supposed the elder woman was his mother: handsome woman, looked somebody; both were wearing good pearls. He took one of the front seats and a daughter on his knee, and in his mind's eye he saw the pretty paragraph that would appear in *Hearsays* next day. He caught Paul's eye, waved and beckoned to him, and pointed him out to the little girls.

Just then the curtain went up.

For the first five minutes Paul could neither see nor hear. There was a singing in his ears, a mist before his eyes, and his heart beat at his ribs in tumultuous thumps for all the world like Simon's tail upon the floor. Gradually he began to be conscious of his surroundings; of the tense profiles on either side of him; of what the people on the stage were saying; and, as though she knew what he was feeling, Lucy slipped her hand within his arm. The kind little touch seemed to restore his sanity, and he found he could look at the stage.

Miss Duval had a most friendly reception when she came on, and presently came "Mellory." "Mellory," with a long slim waist and full crinolined skirts that swayed as she walked, betraying white stockings and narrow sandal-shoes with crossed elastic round her slender ankles. "Mellory," with her heavy hair smoothly parted and

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confined in a bead-embroidered net. She wore a little knot of violets, too, tucked into her waistband, and Paul knew whence they came. He began to enjoy himself, and once more forgot everything but the play.

When the curtain went down on the first act there was quite moderate applause, and his mother turned to Paul, saying decidedly: "That poor Mr. Maythorne has been unfairly disparaged. The thing is true and human, and you've certainly done your part splendidly. No wonder he is pleased. I do congratulate you, Paul. Miss Duval is a very fine actress."

"Miss Burford is perfectly sweet," Lucy whispered. "I would love to know her. Do you think I ever shall?"

Paul went to smoke in the corridor, and Maythorne joined him, suggesting he'd like to meet his people. So Paul took him and introduced him to his mother and Lucy.

They were going back to-morrow? That was a pity; he had hoped to have the pleasure of calling. Yes: those were his little girls, Polly and Pen. A great event for them to be up so late. The lady with them was their governess and his housekeeper. A great friend of his late wife, a most trustworthy, good soul. Yes, he was fortunate in the company, it was really first-rate. . . . The bell—he must go back: but would wait a moment so as not to meet any one. Authors were always nervous, you know.

The minuet came in the second act, and—wonder of wonders!—was encored.

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Paul went behind in the interval, and Maythorne came and talked to Mrs. Staniland and Lucy again; so did Mr. and Mrs. Flint.

It was in the third act that Allegra really got her chance. Her loyalty and tenderness to the queer old coterie that formed her father's little court, her vain attempts to fortify her heart against the assaults of a lover who had ruthlessly destroyed some of her most cherished illusions, and her final surrender to that lover, were by turns pathetic and deliciously funny. Matthew, sentimental and easily moved, frankly wiped his eyes during one passage while Polly patted his arm and whispered, "Don't cry, dear Daddy; it's sure to come right in the end."

It did. Bessie Brimmel's gentle ghost had seen to that.

At the end there were enthusiastic calls for all the chief characters, and, finally, shouts for "Author."

Matthew, large and beaming (unlike the usual timid wreck an author is on a first night), appeared with admirable promptitude. Had the audience demanded a speech he was prepared for them; but it was already late, and only one rather ironical voice at the back of the pit was heard to shout, "Speech!"

It was very late when Allegra reached her rooms. Candle and matches were set ready on the slab in the hall. She carefully put the chain on the door and, light-footed as a shadow, climbed the three long flights of stairs. Some soup in a little saucepan, a cup and plate, and half a loaf of bread, were set ready on a tray. There was a

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gas-ring on the top of the stove, but when she tried to light it she found the slot-meter demanded a shilling, and on turning out her bag every other coin was forthcoming, but no shilling.

She was dog-tired, and rather cold, but she was too careful of her health to go to bed hungry. She broke some pieces of bread into the cold soup and ate it, though the tears were running down her cheeks.

Then it suddenly occurred to her that the other fire in what had been the bedroom also had a meter, and that pennies did for that. So she lit it, put on her dressing-gown and sat in front of it to brush her hair.

She felt indescribably lonely.

She thought of Matthew with his little girls, of Paul with his mother and sister. No other member of the company was alone, as she was. Each of them had somebody. She knew she had made a success, but there was no one to be glad for her; no one with whom she could talk it over; and suddenly she realised all that Rosa Rendal had been to her. Had Rosa been there, she would have brushed Allegra's hair. She always brushed Allegra's hair when she had done particularly well. Rosa would have been pleased. And yet for a month or more she had almost forgotten Rosa, but now she remembered. Rosa, so honest and discriminating in her praise, so generous and whole-hearted when she could praise.

Intent on her quest, Allegra had never looked back. Now that she had reached what was, at all events, a temporary goal, it seemed an aching

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emptiness. She longed for her aunt, though when she was at Oxford at Christmas she had discouraged any tentative suggestions that Mrs. Dew had made as to coming up to share a little flat and "see after her." She wanted to be quite free to shape her life as she would . . . and this was how she was shaping it.

There would have been hot soup for her if her aunt had been in London.

She sat on by the fire, brushing her hair spasmodically and crying steadily, till the penny-worth of gas, which didn't last very long, was exhausted and the fire went out. So she arose and, tired as she was, steadily and methodically went through all her usual preparations for bed, and, when she had finished, knelt down and prayed her usual prayer— "Please make them like me, oh, please, dear Lord, make them like me tremendously."

She opened her window top and bottom and scurried into bed.

"I might as well have failed," she reflected dismaly, "if I'm to feel like this."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE next fortnight changed Allegra's wistful depression to an interest in life so absorbing as to leave no time for introspection, or the poignant consciousness that no one was particularly interested in her. On the contrary, she became aware that several people were keenly interested, and perhaps, for the first time since she joined what Maythorne in his more inspired moments called "the great army of Impersonators," she began to find certain other people as interesting as herself.

There was no question now that *Little St. Germains* had settled down for a run. For how long a run no one could yet prophesy; but the "libraries" had come forward with confidence, and every bookable seat was sold for the next six weeks.

There had, of course, been many cuts and alterations since the first night; but now the piece had got into its stride, and Allegra, less strenuously occupied all day, began to look about her and discover that there were quite a number of pleasant and enjoyable things in life besides the triumphant thrill of successful artistic achievement.

She had never forgotten her Westingley landlady's impertinent assumption that she had no friends outside "the profession." The remark rankled, because it was, in the main, true.

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For some years she had been so very busy that she had almost lost sight of the friends made in her school-days at Oxford. Especially was this so since her guardian's death. All his intercourse with her had been entirely kind, understanding, and delightful; and when it ended, the sense of loss and painful cleavage in her life was so afflicting that the only possible way of bearing it was to set her memories in a sacred hidden shrine. For her there seemed a great gulf fixed between this beautiful old man she had loved so well and the people with whom she was thrown in daily contact, clever and excellent though she acknowledged many of them to be.

All her life she had passionately loved beauty, especially physical beauty, and his clean-shaven, chiselled face and noble head, with the trim white hair that rippled at the temples (he had never yielded to a don-like shagginess), had unconsciously moulded her taste and given her a love of finish and exquisite detail in her own appearance.

Both conventionally, by virtue of his birth, breeding, and scholarship, and actually in the sweetness and simplicity of his nature, he was a gentleman in the best sense of that hard-worked and often misused word. Allegra never expected, nor did she find, that particular kind of general pleasantness among her fellows. She missed it poignantly, and armed herself with her undeviating purpose and a very real indifference towards most people. She was friendly to all and made hardly any friends. Probably she thereby avoided a good many entanglements, but correspondingly

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narrowed her outlook; and of this she was becoming aware.

During the last month her experience was widening, for she had got to know three people outside her usual set. These were Matthew Maythorne, Paul, and his sister Lucy.

She was grateful to Matthew for having, as she thought, created a character in his novel that Paul instantly recognised as a perfect part for her. She liked his big cheerfulness, even his rather noisy manner did not offend her. She liked his fair, well-set head with the crisply rippling hair. We all have a secret weakness for some special personal characteristic, and Allegra adored curly hair. His little girls had got it, too, she had noticed on the first night of his play. Another thing Allegra adored was praise, and Matthew did not stint his. Paul might admire her acting—she was sure he did—but he did not flatter her with the frank lavishness of Maythorne. She was convinced that, whereas Paul admired her gifts, he was not always equally admiring of her, the actual, real Allegra. Now, Maythorne admired both, and said so over and over again on every possible and (Paul sometimes thought) impossible occasion.

She did not regard Maythorne as a possible lover. To her he seemed middle-aged (he was thirty-eight), a kindly, elderly man from whom it was quite safe and pleasant to accept a species of jocular homage that was agreeable and in no way compromising. She thought she perceived a strongly developed strain of domesticity in Maythorne that made him singularly suitable as a

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friend, an influential friend, she hoped, who would be able to help her in her fight for recognition.

His love of little paragraphs in the Press, the constantly recurring snapshots of his children, his house near Dorking, his motor, his pigs—in their most modern and sanitary of styes on two floors—in no way revolted Allegra's taste, because publicity is the breath of life to theatrical enterprise. And she hoped "the management" would send her own very successful photographs as "Mellory" to several picture-papers and give her a gratuitous "ad." that way.

Maythorne had books of these Press-cuttings and pictures, and had brought one of them, containing a selection of the most recent, to show Allegra how the thing should be done. In her turn she showed it quite gravely to Paul when he called upon her at her "flat" one afternoon after *Little St. Germains* had been running a fortnight.

But Paul made fun of the pigs in the villa-residence styes, of Maythorne in knickerbockers playing clock-golf on one of his lawns, of Maythorne in a punt with his little girls, of Maythorne in gaiters, carrying a gun to shoot rabbits in a photographer's warren; and the very latest of Maythorne driving his car, with Appleton and Miss Duval seated in the tonneau, caused Paul to howl with laughter and bury his head in one of the black cushions.

"I only wish I'd been there, too," was all she said. She could not understand his point of view.

Nevertheless, she was far more intimate with Paul than with Maythorne; although he, follow-

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ing the easy theatrical custom, always called her Allegra. Whereas Paul was careful to call her Miss Burford.

That afternoon she said to him: "Your name is very long and tiresome. Suppose I call you Paul —shall you mind?"

"I shall be honoured."

"And you'd better call me Allegra. I like it better than Burford, which, after all, isn't really my name; every one calls me Allegra."

"I always think of you as Allegra."

"Well, then, let us—we're friends, aren't we?"

"I'm sure I hope so."

"Yet sometimes I feel you don't quite approve of me, you know, and I'd like to know why."

"It would be very impertinent of me to disapprove."

"Then I'm convinced you are often impertinent, and I'd like it much better if you'd speak out instead of looking at me with that queer, quizzical expression— Yes, you do, I've seen you. Over and over again, especially lately. What is it you mind?"

"I have no right to 'mind' anything."

"Oh, don't be sticky and dignified and tiresome. What is it?"

"Well, if you will have it, it seems to me—mind, I only say it seems—that you are a bit too . . ." Paul paused, reddened, as Allegra demanded impatiently: "Too what?"

"Too pleased with praise that is not in the least discriminating."

"Aren't you fond of praise?"

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"I haven't had much, but I think if I did get any I should care very much about its quality. It wouldn't give me any pleasure if people praised me whose taste I deplored."

"If they praised *me*, I couldn't deplore their taste. I should think it most discriminating."

"It probably is. . . ."

"I don't like it," Allegra continued plaintively, "when you look ironical, sometimes even scornful. . . ."

"Never, at you, never—I couldn't!"

"You see, I do enjoy it when people like my acting, and say so. If you wrote a play of your very own you'd enjoy it when people said nice things about it and you—the sort of things they say about Mr. Maythorne and his play—now, wouldn't you?"

"Probably I should, tremendously—but I'd rather they talked about the work than about me."

"Well, if I create a character, surely it's my work just as much as if I wrote it. I think you are rather lacking in intellectual charity, or you would be more sympathetic."

"I'm sure you are right. Don't let us talk about it any more. I apologise most humbly for any ironical looks you may have imagined you saw. . . ."

"I'm quite sure I never imagined anything. If you are there while Mr. Maythorne is talking to me you always look like that, and it makes me feel uncomfortable."

"You make *me* feel a perfect brute, and almost afraid to ask what I came to ask you."

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“What did you come to ask me?”

“If I might bring my sister to see you. She is coming up to-morrow and is going to stay with me at my rooms till Friday. Then I take her home and bring Simon back on Monday. The Miss Stukeleys have contrived a little bedroom for her.”

“But of course I’d love to know your sister. I did just see her that first night. She was one of the few people I noticed. The other lady was your mother, I know. They were both so pretty and looked very kind.”

“Lucy is frightfully keen to meet you.”

“Tell me, is she clever and literary and fastidious, like you? Does *she* write?”

“Lucy! She writes a large round hand like a child of ten, and can’t spell for nuts. She’s not in the least clever, but she’s awfully wise, and the sweetest-tempered soul in the world.”

“What do you mean by wise?”

“What I say. It’s quite a different thing from cleverness, and much rarer. It’s difficult to define, but you know it when you meet it.”

“Am I wise?”

Paul laughed: “Geniuses are never wise.”

“Tell me more about her. What does she do?”

“Manages the lot of us and is as good as an extra bailiff to my fathér, and knows as much about animals as most vets.”

“When will you bring her?”

“To-morrow afternoon, if I may, because I’m taking her to the matinée on Wednesday afternoon, and she’d be wildly excited to think she had

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seen you 'off.' And then I've another petition. . . . Will you lunch with us at my rooms on Thursday? I want you to see them."

"I'd love that, too—only, Simon won't be there."

"But he'll be there when you come the next time."

"I'd like it very much—and you promise not to look scornful?"

"I think it's awfully good of you to care how I look, but I don't think you'll have any cause for complaint. . . . And, listen: there used to be a rule in nursery days, that if one of us was being teased, and after a reasonable time, he said, 'Please don't; I've had enough,' it was 'the law of the jungle' and very rigidly enforced. But you oughtn't to mind a little harmless chaff."

"I expect," Allegra said thoughtfully, "it makes a very great difference if one is brought up in a nursery with other children. I had a queer childhood, because, you see, both my parents died before I was six. Then my aunt took me, and, though kind, she was very, very strict and, being elderly, hadn't much patience . . . and I know I was a tiresome little thing. Then I had a dreadful experience at a sort of charity-school up in the North, where I was always miserable except when I was ill, which was pretty often. Then came six entirely happy years at Oxford with my dear guardian."

"But I thought you said there were boys there?"

"Yes, but only in the holidays; and, though

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they were always delightful to me, my position was rather anomalous, for, you see, I really belonged to the kitchen regions. Mr. Wycherley spoiled me and loved to have me with him, and my aunt was always impressing upon me that I mustn't push myself or force my society 'on the young gentlemen.' They knew this, and it made them extra nice to me always—so it's quite true I never have been chaffed in the way you mean."

"I thought not . . . but it's never too late to learn."

Allegra was much concerned over her tea-party. She would have liked to ask Maythorne, but knew that somehow or other—she couldn't think why—Paul never seemed quite natural when Maythorne was present; so she invited Richard Black, whose wife was touring in the provinces, to make it a square party.

She bought chrysanthemums and decorated the mantelpiece, and she hung on the bare walls a few old engravings of Oxford that she had brought from her bedroom in Westingley. She fetched delicious little cakes from Richoux's, and herself cut beautifully thin anchovy sandwiches. By four o'clock everything was ready, and she was just going to put the kettle on the top of the stove in her bedroom when Lucy arrived.

"Paul's coming at the proper time," Lucy announced. "I'm afraid I'm dreadfully early, but the fact is, I've been calling on a great-aunt who always reduces us to pulp, and I fled after a very short visit, because I felt if I didn't I'd be too

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limp and humiliated to put in an appearance at all. Paul meanly pleaded a pressing engagement with an important editor, and left me to face it alone."

"You don't look very cast-down," Allegra said, her brown eyes full of frankest admiration for Lucy's fresh face framed in rather blown-about bright hair.

"Not now, because I'm here, and I know you'll be kind and comforting, but if you'd seen the deflated balloon that crawled out of that house in Hill Street twenty minutes ago, you'd realise what I've been through. . . . How nice you have made it here!" And Lucy looked round the little room with a sort of brooding tenderness that seemed to endow it with all sorts of unsuspected charms.

"What does the great-aunt do to you?" Allegra asked.

"She sits up very straight in her chair—she's seventy-eight and handsome and perfectly well—and she surveys us through her tortoiseshell starers with a sort of glum astonishment that such creatures should be permitted to exist."

"But what does she object to?"

"I'm not sure. I've often wondered. I know she thinks I'm stupid," Lucy said cheerfully, "and that Paul is more or less mad, but we wouldn't mind that if she'd let the others alone. But she always foretells the most terrible disasters—such as that my married sister—she's just gone out again to India—is certain to lose her children because of the climate (she's in a hill station), and

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that father will be thrown out hunting this winter, and that, being a heavy man, he will assuredly be seriously injured if not killed, and that he has no business to hunt at all at his age—he's only fifty-eight."

"What a dreadful old lady!"

"When she gets on the subject of father I could fall upon her and beat her."

"But why do you go and see her if she's so disagreeable?" Allegra asked in wonder.

"She's a relation, you see, and old, and not very well off, and so they tell us we must."

"Who tells you?"

"Father and mother. She's father's aunt, you see, and she won't have a home anywhere because she thinks she hasn't enough money to have a nice one . . . so she puts in about eight months of the year in visits, and lives in rooms and boarding-houses for the rest of the time."

"But why do people have her if she's so disagreeable?"

"I've often wondered—but I think it's because, if people are well off and happy themselves, they feel they ought to be kind . . . and, then, she is so terrifying, and would make such a row if they didn't have her, they'd never face it. One good thing, she never stays long anywhere. She's with our meek bachelor uncle just now, and, as he goes to his club nearly all the time, he's less to be pitied than the rest of us."

"She sounds the sort of old lady," Allegra said thoughtfully, "who'd be awfully useful in a play—I'd rather like to see her."

Allegra

Lucy looked at Allegra, her whole face lighted up with its soft sparkle: "She's heard about you . . . and she's frightfully cross——"

"But why? What have I done?"

"Three unforgivable things," Lucy said, ticking them off on her fingers. "You act, you are young, and she can't find out anything whatever to your discredit. But the person she's angriest with at present is father, because he lets Paul live in London and write and do the things he wants to do, instead of reading for the Bar, or going into Parliament or the Foreign Office, or any of the things Paul would particularly hate. She can never understand why, father being what he is, we haven't all turned out desperately bad characters before now. If she lives to be a hundred, as she probably will, she'll never see that it's just because we're so fond of father, and wouldn't really vex him for the world, that we put up with her for five minutes."

"I wonder," Allegra said thoughtfully, "if I could be kind to people I disliked just because someone I loved wanted me to be kind? . . . I fear not. I simply couldn't stand interference."

"But isn't it . . ." Lucy hesitated, "rather lonely to have no one to interfere?"

"Sometimes it is." The first night of *Little St. Germain*s flashed into her mind, but she wasn't going to confess it. "But all the same, I think even the dearest relative must be very hampering. You see, it's different for you, but I have my work, which must always come first—it can't give way to anyone or anything."

Allegra

Lucy looked thoughtful. "Suppose you were married?" she suggested. "What then?"

"Marriage is, I think, a very overrated institution," Allegra announced loftily. "The more I hear and see of it, the less does it appeal to me. And how girls can be in such a hurry to get married, as if there was nothing else in life, I can't understand. Can you?"

"It's tiresome," Lucy admitted, "when people keep wanting to marry you and you don't want them that way at all . . . but I don't see what you're to put in its place if you . . . abolish it."

"I don't suggest it should be abolished. Let it exist for those that like it; but why force it upon those that don't?"

"But is it forced on those who don't?"

"Perhaps not exactly forced . . . but there's a consensus of opinion that it's about the only proper thing for a woman to do, and it's allowed to interfere with every other thing she can possibly want to do, and that's what makes it so tiresome."

"But, surely, lots of actresses are married?"

"Oh dear yes, and I dare say I shall be like everyone else, and get married some day."

"I, too, think it highly probable. You know, you were adorable when 'Mellory' was in love."

"Oh, in love . . . that's another thing altogether. It would be glorious to be really in love."

"But, surely . . . if you were, you'd want to be married."

Allegra shook her head: "I don't know. You see, even when I'm 'Mellory' I find myself wondering whether . . . afterwards her man wouldn't

Allegra

be very hard and domineering . . . and whether she'd be really happy with him."

"Oh, yes, she would. She'd manage him. He'd think he settled everything, but she would really. That's how she seems to me."

"Perhaps 'Mellory' might, but Allegra couldn't. I could never stoop to pretending a man was getting his own way in order to get mine. I know that sort of woman is supposed to be so wonderful, but I think it's just humbug and lies and deceit. . . . I could never be bothered."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" cried Lucy in comical dismay. "I'm afraid a lot of women are humbugs and liars, then."

"I've no doubt of it," Allegra said severely; "but I've no intention of being one of them. People who are habitually bullied usually *are* humbugs and liars."

"You take it all too seriously," Lucy pleaded. "Surely common sense and tact can't be branded as deceit?"

"You oughtn't to need tact if you love people," Allegra said. "If you have to be tactful you don't really care . . . or they don't."

Lucy shook her head. "I think the more people care the more is needed . . . perhaps actors are different and more imaginative, but ordinary men *need* managing. You must remember that when two people live together they can't be at high pressure or in exalted frames of mind all the time—however much they care. It would be too exhausting!"

"Not so exhausting as the necessity for tact.

Allegra

That's why so many books and plays are cowardly—they pretend to tell everything, and they don't."

"Oh, but they do: every imaginable misery and unpleasantness. Have you told Mr. Maythorne you're sure 'Mellory' will be miserable?"

"Yes; and he says, 'That's as it may be. I only carry the story so far.'"

"Have you read the book?"

"No, not yet; your brother asked me not to do it while I was working on the play: not till I'd decided on my reading of the part—and I've had no time since. Have you read it?"

"No. Paul's very funny about it. He won't tell us which of Mr. Maythorne's novels it is. Have you read any of the others?"

"I'm ashamed to say I haven't—but then, as I say, I've read very little except plays. I read a lot when I was at school, and since then practically nothing that didn't, somehow, bear on my profession. The first holiday I get I'll take a course of Mr. Maythorne's books."

Lucy made no answer. Her face had lost its soft sparkle. It was square and grave; her eyes were bent on the mauve carpet, and at that moment Allegra was impressed by the fact that Lucy's mouth and chin were exceedingly firm, and that she was with difficulty restraining herself from some remark that she felt it would be better not to make.

Of course Allegra's curiosity was roused: "Have you read any of them?"

Lucy looked up and met her inquiring eyes: "Don't tell Paul," she began, when there came a

Allegra

gentle rap with the brass knocker Paul had given Allegra for her sitting-room door, because of its resemblance to "Gruffanuff" in *The Rose and the Ring*, and he and Richard Black came in together.

Allegra's visitors were never shown up. Her two rooms and a box-room, where the door was fastened by a bolt on the landing side, because the handle was lost, constituted the top floor. She had nailed her visiting-card above the "Gruffanuff" knocker, and whoever answered the front-door bell always said, "You keeps on till you come to it"—so she was easy to find. When you had kept on for two long flights of steep stairs with a narrow pathway of worn oilcloth, and mounted yet another steeper flight without any covering at all, you reached Allegra's rooms.

The tea-party was a great success. Lucy was thrilled all over again at meeting yet another member of "the profession" in private life, and to find that he was nothing like so young and masterful as "Mellory's" lover, but a tired-looking, middle-aged man with a gentle manner. Finding that, like all theatrical folk, he was quite ready to talk about his trade, Lucy spent an entrancing hour in asking him all the things about the play that she had wanted to ask Paul. Somehow it had never been as easy as it ought to have been to talk to Paul about that play—not about his work on it: and, as Paul was comfortably and completely absorbed in some discussion with Allegra, Lucy seized the good moment, gently led the conversation in the direction of Maythorne, and, having reached him, paused and played about.

Allegra

"You know what we call him in the theatre?" asked Richard Black.

"No. What?"

"Hasn't your brother told you? Why, he's known as 'The Great I AM.' There's no holding him since *Little St. Germains* caught on."

Lucy looked across the room at her brother, who was sitting on the sofa beside Allegra, their heads close together over a book of Press notices which they appeared to be reading in a sort of chorus.

"Tell me, Mr. Black," she said, lowering her voice, "isn't this play rather different from his other work? . . . I've only read one of his books . . . just lately . . . but it seemed very different. . . ." Lucy still kept a wary eye on Paul.

"Well, you'd expect that—wouldn't you?—when your brother had such a lot to do with it."

"He really did do a lot of it, didn't he?"

"Everybody knows that."

Lucy shook her head. "Nobody knows it, really: but I'm glad you think so."

Richard Black looked puzzled. "I assure you," he began, when Paul got up, saying: "Lucy, we must be off at once; we've got to get back and dress and go right down to Chelsea for that wretched dinner. And it's more than time we cleared out and let Miss Burford rest before she goes on to-night."

BOOK III

CHAPTER XIX

"**N**OW, don't you get all tumbled, Pen," Polly said in a warning tone. "Remember we're to be fortygraffed with Daddy at four o'clock."

"I'm not gettin' dirty, I'm only clippin' my hedge."

"I don't think you ought to be gardening at all just now."

"We're to be fortygraffed gardenin'. Daddy said so."

"Yes, but with him, not by ourselves; and if you've clipped all the hedge first, there'll be nothin' left for me."

"It doesn't matter," Pen said wearily. "We shan't *really* clip anything in the fortygraff . . . only pitend to. I say, Polly, don't you wish Daddy wasn't so fond of being fortygraffed? Becky's never done. Why isn't she?"

Pen stopped clipping as she asked this question, and waited for Polly's answer.

Polly wagged her head knowingly: "Becky's a dear, dear thing, but she isn't very beautiful, is she?"

"Are we very beautiful?" asked downright Pen. Polly smiled, a small, complacent smile, as she said cautiously, "Well . . . I don't know about beautiful, but we look jolly pretty in the forty-graffs. Every one says so."

Allegra

"Is Daddy beautiful?"

"Men aren't beautiful. Daddy's celebrated, that's much better than beautiful. It's because Daddy's so celebrated we've got to be forty-graffed so much. He told me so hisself. 'It's the pelumpty of celebrity,' he said."

Pen sighed. "I wish he could have the celebrity without the pelumpty. Then perhaps he'd be with us by ourselves, and not always with a tiresome person coming to make us stand still in the mickle of what we're doing. It does seem to cut into things so."

"Daddy hasn't got time to play about just like ordinary people; he says so."

"I know." Pen sighed, again. "But I can't see why other people should always want to know what *we're* doin'. Now, this afternoon, if only that man hadn't been coming, we could have gone into Dorking with Becky in the pony-cart, and seen the shops."

"Pooh! who cares for Dorking?" Polly demanded scornfully. "I like London shops. I like going to London in the car. I'd just as soon stay here as go into Dorking."

"I rather like Dorking shops," Pen said humbly. "They know us and they're very attentive."

"They know us in London, too, especially in the book-shops. I like it when the young lady says: 'Are these Mr. Maythorne's little girls?' when Becky gives the address to send the things."

"I don't," said Pen; "I hate it."

"Why?" Polly asked in astonishment.

"I don't know, but it makes me feel silly."

Allegra

"What's Becky gone to Dorking to-day for?"

"Housekeeping things, she said. She likes to get things there 'cos it helps the shops. She won't have everything from London. She says, 'Give the little people a chance.'"

"She's a funny old thing sometimes," Polly remarked tolerantly. "Daddy says she's one of the old school, so I suppose that's why."

"I love Becky," Pen announced, looking red and uncomfortable. "And she's *not* a funny old thing, and you oughtn't to say such things."

"Pooh! I love Becky, too, and I shall say what I like. Look, there's the car; that'll be the camera man. Shall I tilt my hat back or take it off? Which looks nicest, do you think? I wonder what paper these will be for. I hope a sixpenny one. The halfpenny ones do make us look so ugly."

"Some day," Pen remarked with vindictive emphasis, "I shall make a face in a shilling magazine."

The children were in Maythorne's Dutch garden, waiting to assist in one of the series—"Charming Pictures of a well-known Dramatist's Home-Life"—which were appearing in the pages of the *Carlton Magazine* during the summer. The May afternoon was very warm and lovely, and the box hedge Maythorne and his little daughters were to clip—a little daughter on each side of a stalwart father in shirt sleeves and flannel trousers—had been already carefully trimmed by the admirable gardeners, except for some three feet left straggly especially for this occasion. Though Polly was only nine and Pen but seven, they were almost as

Allegra

used to posing before the camera as if they were ‘movies.’ Maythorne left no stone unturned that might increase his popularity, and no one knew better than he that his enormous public consisted largely of simple-minded people who welcomed his willingness to share his innermost domesticities with them. Fatherhood is a beautiful and by no means uncommon state. The relationship between a father and motherless little daughters is supposed to be peculiarly and poignantly tender, and therefore did Maythorne invite all and sundry to sympathise with his bereavement; to behold how he sought healing for his wounded heart in the constant society of his little daughters; and that every moment he could spare from the exercise of his “magic craft” was spent with them.

He really was exceedingly fond of them, for they were healthy, pretty, and intelligent. Much fonder of them than he had been of Ada, his wife, for some years before her death; and she died when Polly was four years old.

Sometimes, when he allowed himself to drop the pose of disconsolate widower, he acknowledged to himself that, had poor Ada lived, she might have been rather a drag upon him. There had been an incomprehensible obstinacy about Ada; an inability to adapt herself to new conditions; an inconvenient memory for things Matthew would fain have buried in oblivion; and a tiresome clinging to old friends whose habits were even less adaptable than her own. Old friends who were impossible, in that they refused to fit into Matthew’s new scheme of life, which ever grew

Allegra

larger, and to his wife more complicated, as his sales and his royalties increased.

Ada had belonged to an inconveniently large and long-lived family. Her brothers and sisters were bad enough, but her parents and her uncles and aunts were inconceivably disconcerting.

Matthew's parents had considerably removed themselves during his early twenties, and his only sister, older than he, had married, gone to South Africa, and stayed there. Moreover, her husband was a successful fruit-grower who thought himself every bit as good as Maythorne. Yes: his sister was satisfactory, showed no disposition to cling in any embarrassing fashion, and their postal intercourse was entirely harmonious and cordial.

In several of Maythorne's novels he enlarged upon the theme of a young man of genius and social position, whose whole after-life was marred and hampered by a too early marriage with a girl who was his social and mental inferior. To his credit, these novels only appeared after Ada's death.

She had been a board-school mistress in Preston, and he met her while working for a newspaper there. They were engaged for three years, and he married her when he was twenty-six and she two years older. Two little boys were born who died in infancy. Then came Polly and Pen, and by this time Maythorne had begun to reap the fruit of his popularity, untiring industry and admirable faculty for literary business. He was becoming a rich man, and at this time one of his favourite quotations was, "He that hath wings, let him soar," but Ada showed no disposition to soar with

Allegra

him. As his circle of friends increased in size and social status, so did Ada become more shy and awkward and uncomfortable in the society the hospitable Matthew loved to gather about him.

Shortly after Pen's birth Matthew decided that it would be better for his family to live in the country. "Wellclose," a property between Dorking and Leatherhead of some three hundred acres, came into the market, and Matthew bought it. Ada wrung her hands when she saw the size of the house, burst into tears, and, with the strong North Country accent no efforts on her part could lessen when she was excited, she declared she could "niver, niver cope with it."

"Then you must have a housekeeper," Matthew answered cheerfully. He was really very patient with Ada. But at this suggestion she only wept more bitterly than before.

There was no doubt about it. Ada was not clever with servants. They kept a great many, very highly paid. The household bills at Wellclose were enormous, and, although Matthew was far from being a stingy man, he liked to receive good value for his money. He certainly got very little in the way of comfort for the sums expended at Wellclose.

Again he suggested a housekeeper.

To Ada the suggestion was so horrific that she took to her bed. Matthew was nothing if not resourceful. Fully determined that no relative of Ada's should get a footing in the house (she had suggested an unmarried sister), he considered what could be done. He detested Ada's family,

Allegra

but there was one old friend of hers whom he did not detest, and this friend she had been permitted to retain.

Rebecca Starr had been her fellow-teacher: a sturdy Lancashire lass, with no frills and plenty of brains, she had far more resolution than Ada and none of her obstinacy. Moreover, she was possessed of tact and a sense of proportion—qualities which poor Ada wholly lacked.

It happened that just at this time, when Matthew had moved his family to Wellclose, and found his wife so lachrymose and difficult, that Becky, as her friends called her, had given up her post in one school and decided to take six months' holiday before seeking another. She came to stay with Ada for a fortnight, and had remained ever since.

For just then poor Ada clung to Becky with all her feeble strength. She was "someone she was used to," she was decided without being terrifying or "grand." She listened to Ada's everlasting grievances with sympathy and without contempt; but she was dispassionately fair in the way she brushed away these grievances when, as often happened, they were purely imaginable.

Gradually Becky gathered the reins into her capable hands. First the mistress, then the nursery, and finally the servants, all fell between the shafts of the smoothly-running vehicle Becky delighted to drive.

She was a born organiser, and by the time she had been a month at Wellclose, Matthew began to enjoy his "little place."

Allegra

When she proposed to go home, Ada wept and protested, and Matthew, with the utmost cordiality, begged her to stay on. She remained for four months, then declared she really must go and see about another post.

By this time Matthew had got accustomed to her presence. Her *u*'s were as broad and her *a*'s as clipped as poor Ada's, but they did not annoy Matthew to the same extent, because she never grumbled or was plaintive, and she always talked sense.

To Ada she was indispensable. Matthew made her a definite offer—if she would remain as lady housekeeper he would pay her two-thirds of her salary as headmistress of an elementary school, and she would have no expenses.

Becky demurred.

She was as shrewd as Matthew and more honest.

Matthew offered her the same salary that was given at the school she had in view.

Becky accepted the post.

Matthew felt, and rightly, that it was the best bit of business he had done for many a long day.

Becky nursed poor Ada through her long last illness with untiring devotion; and when Matthew, tearful and broken, begged her to "stay on and take care of us all," Becky stayed—till such time, she told herself, as he married again. She was convinced it would not be for long.

She loved the babies. She had been really fond of poor, clinging, ineffectual Ada, she liked Matthew—in a clear-sighted, rather scornful

Allegra

fashion—though her manner to him was absolutely perfect always in its good-tempered detachment. She had been teaching since she was sixteen, and she was thirty-four at the time of Ada's death.

"Changes are lightsome," practical Becky reflected. Here was plenty to occupy her of a wholly different kind from what had filled her busy days for so many years. She liked the variety of her job at Wellclose. The gardens were a delight to her; so was the fancy farming. She enjoyed catering and arranging for Matthew's many guests, and through it all she never surrendered one iota of her strong identity. She had excellent health—such a refreshing change from poor, ever-ailing, plaintive Ada! And she was entirely devoid of matrimonial "designs" upon Matthew. He knew this, and it vastly increased the comfort of her presence. Moreover, she was so uncompromisingly plain that all his friends accepted her position at Wellclose as a matter of course, and even those most given to suspicions of the kind forebore to suspect any amatory bond between Matthew and his capable housekeeper.

He did not marry nearly so soon as Becky had expected.

He had been free (for so it was that Matthew thought of himself) for over five years, and nothing had happened to shake Becky's sovereignty at Wellclose.

She had almost forgotten to consider the possibility of Matthew's marriage when there arose on the serene horizon the proverbial little cloud,

Allegra

"no bigger than a man's hand," in the shape of the play that was having such a run at the Congreve.

Becky was vaguely disquieted by that play, and she could not have told you why. She was present at the first night, she had been to see it twice since, and she was convinced that Matthew hadn't written a line of it.

She was familiar enough with the patient "ghosts" who "worked on" Matthew's novels, and were always spoken of as "secretaries," to realise that here sounded a voice with a very different *timbre*. The secretaries' work was commonplace as Matthew's own. They were merely so many minor wheels in the huge machine that he used for his literary "output."

This play was not machine-made. As Becky put it, "There was something *to* it." She felt as though Matthew had suddenly essayed to drive a strange and frisky young thoroughbred in double harness with his own evenly-jogging Pegasus. A smash must be the inevitable result.

Besides, there was that girl. Really, Matthew was getting quite silly about that girl. Surely he couldn't want to marry her?

Matthew! who thought so much of social position and was a climber of the most industrious sort!

Yet Becky, who had seen the girl a great many times—Matthew himself fetched her out to Wellclose in his car four Sundays out of five—was not the sort of girl who could be approached with any other intention. Becky was a shrewd judge

Allegra

of character, and she recognised grit and brains when she met them. She liked Allegra. She respected her in spite of her disapproval of Matthew's foolishness.

But what a wife for Matthew!
What a mistress for Wellclose!
What a mother for Polly and Pen!

It was this last consideration that weighed heaviest with Becky. To do her justice, she was ready to hand over everything to the right woman. And for her the right woman meant somebody who would first and foremost "mother" the children sensibly and kindly; and Becky couldn't see the makings of a sensible mother in Allegra. "The girl's wrapped up in her acting," thought Becky. "If Matthew marries her and takes her away from it she'll fret herself into a worse neurotic than poor Ada, and if he lets her go on with it, who's to look after things here? Besides, that girl's got clear-sighted eyes. She'd see through Matthew before she'd been married a month. Eh, but it's a fine tangle, whichivver way you look at it."

Becky flicked the pony with the whip. She was driving back from Dorking, and, for a wonder, being without the children, found time to think things over: "That young man's after her too, if I'm not mistaken. Now, he's much more her sort than Matthew—but, then, I suppose he hasn't two sixpences to rub together."

The clipping of the box-hedge and its resultant photographs had been successfully accomplished.

Allegra

It is not usual to clip a box-hedge with your back to it, but when the faces turned towards the public are as pretty as those of Polly and Pen there are excuses. Polly was dark-eyed, with a delicious golden bloom warm as a ripe King William pear that has been well sunned. Her hair was walnut brown, curly, and short; and it was one of the griefs of her childhood that Becky would never let her wear the disfiguring large bow on the top of her head that adorned so many of her contemporaries.

Pen was not darkly brilliant like her sister. Her eyes were light blue, and their usual expression was a sort of amused surprise at the astonishing things that happened in her world. Polly was already to a certain extent sophisticated. Pen was very simple, and implicitly believed everything she was told, even by a daddy much given to joking and pulling people's legs, especially sturdy pink legs that wore no stockings in the summer. Polly's exquisitely-tinted face was round, with indeterminate blurred features that might, as she grew older, spread into the commonplace. Pen's face was a long oval, in summer burnt to clear, even brown, in winter rather pale with delicately-marked blue veins near the temples.

Both children were happy, healthy, and wholesome, and Becky saw to it that they were always daintily and suitably dressed. Perhaps a thought more plainly than their father quite liked. But where the children were concerned Becky was so admirable that, except in the matter of the constant photographs which she strongly depre-

Allegra

cated, Matthew allowed her to have very much her own way.

Becky had returned from Dorking, and was seated at her desk entering the amounts of her purchases in her account-book, when Matthew came to show her a couple of letters he had received from admiring strangers about the play. Neither letter mentioned his novels, but just then his success as a dramatist almost overshadowed, even in his own estimation, that of his books.

She read the letters and handed them back, saying dryly, "They are certainly enthusiastic."

"I must let Staniland see these," Matthew remarked; "he'll be gratified."

Becky looked up and stared at him. Her eyes, the one good feature in her plain face, were bright and black as sloes, and he suffered a moment's *frisson* of discomfort as she said, "They are doubtless most gratifying to you, but I don't see where young Staniland comes in."

"Surely it's plain enough. He worked on the play for me, and of course he'll be pleased to hear how much people like it. I feel it would be ungenerous not to share these laudatory letters with him."

Still holding Matthew with that curiously disconcerting gaze, Becky said abruptly, "I wish you'd tell me what I'm to say to people when they ask me—as they often do ask me—which of your books that play is supposed to be taken from. You *said* it was *Riches are Sorrow*, but I've read it, and it's perfect nonsense to tell people that."

Allegra

"When you come to drāmatisation" (he pronounced it drāmatisation) "you can't be too literal. You may tell the people who ask you that, of course, there's a great deal of original matter in that play, but the *germ* is to be found in *Riches are Sorrow*; and you, who are something of a physiologist, know that the germ is the life."

"Or the death, very often," Becky murmured. Aloud she said: "Then I suppose you and Mr. Staniland talked it over and settled the new plot?"

"Naturally," Matthew answered gravely. "Much discussion is inevitable in work of that sort. Staniland did what he had to do thoroughly well—I give him every credit for it—but I question whether he has the genius that implies 'an infinite capacity for taking pains.' I fear he is rather idle and dilettante."

"Idle!" Becky repeated. "Eh, that's a pity. What makes you think he's idle?" And she still held Matthew with her bright, questioning gaze.

"Well, here we are at the end of May. Again and again I've suggested to him that we should start on another play together. There are twenty-eight of my novels still awaiting drāmatisation. Yet he always puts me off with what seem to me trivial and feeble excuses."

"What sort of excuses?"

"That he's too busy; or not in the vein; or that he's going out of town, and yet he finds time for quite a lot of journalism—a little article here, a

Allegra

short story there—Journalism! Which means a few guineas at most, when there are thousands to be made in a successful play."

"Thousands!" Becky repeated thoughtfully. "But would young Staniland make thousands, if it was your play?"

"He should have his share," Matthew announced magnanimously. "He *is* having his share, as it is, in the success of *Little St. Germaine*. He must be getting as much as ten pounds a week. I greatly fear it's that makes him so idle and independent."

"I niver heard t'like," Becky said with an irony wholly lost on Matthew. "If I was you I wouldn't wait for him another minute. I wouldn't wait on the pleasure of a foolish young man like that, when you might be making thousands for yourself. It's not like you, Matthew."

He looked thoughtful for a minute, then brightened: "He does the spade-work so uncommonly well—all the things that I find so tiresome and that are such a waste of time for me. Besides, I like the fellow. I'd really be pleased to give him a lift."

Becky's eyes were turned upon her accounts. She wished Matthew would go away, for she wanted to finish them.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "young Staniland is writing a play on his own."

"That idea has occurred to me," Matthew admitted, "but I can't believe he would be so foolish. Who would back it for *him*, an utterly unknown youth?"

Allegra

"Still," Becky persisted, "ivvery one must begin some time. You did yourself, Matthew."

"Plays are a very different matter from books," Matthew answered gloomily. "You risk much more. *I didn't begin with plays.*"

"Perhaps he's writing a book."

"Well, whatever he's doing, he's a fool not to come in with me while I'm willing to let him."

"If you show him those nice letters," Becky suggested, dipping her pen in the ink, "mebbe he'll be more reasonable."

Matthew turned to go. He was still in his shirt-sleeves and yew-clipping *négligé*, but he paused at the door to say discontentedly: "I don't know what it is about Staniland; he's friendly enough, but never what I should call genial."

"The children love him," Becky answered, and in the same breath continued, "—seven, eleven, twenty-three, elevenpence halfpenny."

Matthew shut the door.

CHAPTER XX

PAUL thoroughly enjoyed the royalties that came to him through the success of *Little St. Germains*. He felt they were well-earned, and that this money was a business transaction between him and Appleton with which Maythorne had nothing to do. Maythorne was making plenty himself, and accepted, with somewhat irritating complacency, the very considerable kudos that the play brought him.

Paul held his tongue and refused to be drawn into any sort of admission, even by people who not only suspected, but were practically certain of, the real state of affairs. He considered that, having done his job and done it successfully, he was giving full value for any money he had received or ever would receive. He both hoped, and for a brief space believed, that now he was done with Maythorne and all his works; and that, except as a business acquaintance, he need have nothing more to do with him. But in this he was reckoning without Maythorne's friendly pertinacity and real liking for him. Unless he kept away from the theatre altogether, which was the last course possible for anyone so keenly interested and enthusiastic, he was bound to meet Maythorne at every turn.

Moreover, Maythorne had done just the one thing that tended to tighten the very slight hold

Allegra

he had upon Paul, by introducing him to his children, for Paul was hopelessly soft-hearted where children were concerned.

About three o'clock one sunny afternoon in early April, Paul was sitting with Simon in the little garden outside his room, as he smoked and dreamed and very occasionally made notes in a fat little book with marbled-boards. Presently Simon, who was lying at Paul's feet, lifted his head inquiringly at the seldom-heard sound of a motor-horn in that quiet road. Then came the purr of engines, which ceased at the door in the high wall. Simon rose and looked astonished.

There was a murmuring, then a clear, decided voice:

"No, we won't stay in the car. There's nothing to see in this lane. We're coming in with you."

And in they came, Maythorne jovial and noisy, with the announcement, "Run to earth, run to earth! Here he is, in his hiding-place; we've routed him out." And the quiet garden suddenly filled with people.

It seemed that Maythorne had come on hospitable thoughts intent—"it was such a lovely afternoon, Paul must come down to Dorking in the car and stay the night. Well, if he wouldn't stay the night, he could come back by train. Polly and Pen would take no denial." Polly and Pen warmly extended their invitation to Simon, but Daddy demurred—he would take up too much room in the car. Simon, quite aware that his chances of an excursion were being canvassed,

Allegra

devoted himself to the pretty little people in bewitching motor-bonnets who were so kind and friendly. Finally, after much talk, Paul consented to go for the afternoon. He had no engagement, he was not good at excuses, and Polly and Pen were so hospitably pressing, so kind to Simon—such dears, in fact, that, short of being positively churlish, there was nothing to be done but go.

In the back of his brain was the consciousness that his shackles were being riveted on him; that he was doing the very thing he had always sworn he never would do; that he was a fool, laying up for himself an infinite number of painful difficulties later on; that, if he had any sense of self-preservation, he would even at the last moment fabricate a pressing engagement and firmly refuse to go.

He knew all this, and he went.

Besides, there was Allegra.

The more he saw of Allegra, the more she kindled in him an interest so absorbing that the day was a lost day when he didn't contrive to meet her, if only for a few minutes. What could be more delightful for a young and ardent mind than to strike a harmonious chord in another mind that vibrated with delicious sympathy and appreciation? Above all, when the other mind inhabited the bodily form of a graceful girl with deep, inscrutable eyes and a restful, musical voice, whose absolute sincerity was immensely soothing to one who was himself restless, affectionate, and sincere.

Allegra

It had become a habit with him to talk over with her some sketches of the country-folk about his home that he happened to be doing; to read things to her that he was not quite sure of; to show her passages that he thought were good.

The very fact that she knew hardly anything of quite modern fiction made her criticism the fresher and more valuable. She never compared his work with that of his contemporaries. She judged it entirely on its own merits, and always in terms of the theatre. She forced Paul to attempt the most difficult and, when successfully achieved, the most vivid form of word-portrait.

She couldn't be bothered with long analytical descriptions of character; in fact, except for necessary emphasis of physical characteristics, she cared little for descriptions, and states of mind bored her.

"Make him say something that shows this," she would urge. "Make him do something that proves he's an agreeable fraud. Don't be content with telling us so."

"Don't you see him, then?" the mortified author would ask sadly.

"Well, honestly, I only see him in bits. You've got between him and me. I can see him over your shoulder, and that only because I'm tall enough. If you get out of the way, everybody can see him."

"Yet you liked that bit in *The Master of Ballantrae* that I read you."

"I liked it immensely, and I never find fault with *your* descriptions of how people look. I

Allegra

think you do them well. But when it comes to *telling* me a person is kind or odious or charming, I resent it rather. I want to judge for myself. Don't you know how you are always prejudiced against anybody you've heard too much about before you see them?"

"Well, we never heard anything about each other, did we?" Paul asked. "We came to each other with a perfectly open mind."

"I had heard any amount about you," Allegra said.

They were sitting on the mauve sofa, and she wore a pearl-coloured dress with touches of yellow in it and a long chain of amber beads. The mauve-loving lady was still on tour, and Allegra, in spite of her increased salary, stayed on in her rooms; but she had more and prettier clothes.

Just now, earnest and serious, holding Paul with her frank, direct gaze, he was irresistibly reminded of the princess of the Bitley woods.

"I remember you lectured me on being dilettante and only doing everything 'a bit.' You were very severe and crushing."

"Well, didn't I do you good? Aren't you beginning to do things more than 'a bit'? Besides, you've got some of your own back since. Look how down you are on me for being vain!"

"Vain isn't the right word," he said, wrinkling his black brows and looking at her with eyes that wholly belied the frown above them. "You're not vain exactly, but you're extraordinarily conscious of yourself."

"Not of myself, only of the acting me. I sup-

Allegra

pose you'll never learn to distinguish between them, but there's a mighty difference. I think one of the reasons I hate pretence and false modesty and so-called 'tact,' and every sort of humbug, so intensely, is that the other me has to be so many different people."

"I do see it," he said. "I think I understand."

"Now, for instance, this me, that's sitting here on this extremely lumpy sofa, just aches for the country. I would give anything at the present moment to be in a wood with bluebells—they must be at their best just now. But the other me wouldn't leave London for the world, because of *Little St. Germain*s. I wouldn't go where there was any chance of my being stopped and prevented from getting back in plenty of time for this evening's show, not for all the trees in all the woods in the whole world."

"Let's go somewhere that we can get back from. Let's have an afternoon in the country, or, what's next best to it, that's near. Let's go down to Kew and see the lilacs. What about to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, Friday? We might do it to-morrow, provided I'm back by six o'clock. Sunday, Mr. Maythorne is going to take me out to Wellclose. We ought to celebrate to-morrow somehow. It's the hundredth performance."

"Let's make a day of it. We'll go down to Richmond to lunch, taxi there, and then go on from there to Kew. I wish it was a nicer road, and I'd hire a dogcart and drive you down."

"Why can't you motor me down? I love sitting in front. I always do with Mr. Maythorne."

Allegra

"I'm no good at driving a motor. I wouldn't trust myself with you for the world. I'm too used to horses. I learned, mind you, and so did my father, and we're both exactly the same. We always expect a motor to use its intelligence, and it never does. You never get a moment's peace to think your own thoughts, even in your own part of the world. Now, a horse always knows its way, takes the right turnings, goes in at its own gate, stops in its own stable-yard, and takes care of posts and corners."

"What happens then? Do you never get home?"

"We generally found ourselves in the next county before we did—father and I."

"So you gave it up?"

"We did, the driving. Lucy is an excellent driver, and, of course, we've got a young chap who can drive."

"Then we'd better go in a taxi."

"Right: I'll fetch you about half-past eleven, and we'll make a real holiday of it—a long, lovely afternoon under the trees."

"I wish Simon could come," Allegra said wistfully. "That would make it quite like Bitley."

"I'm afraid old Simon can't come to-morrow, but we'll go somewhere another day and take Simon."

Paul had risen and was looking down at Allegra. She, too, rose, and taking hold of the lapels of his coat, said impulsively: "After all, you know, you are rather a dear."

Paul put his hands over hers and held them.

They were very close together.

Allegra

She disengaged her hands gently and turned from him.

"Somehow," she said slowly, "though the gardens are so pretty at Wellclose, and there's a little wood, and cows and pigs and everything, I never feel that Surrey is the real country."

"It isn't," Paul declared. "It's no more like the real country than peasants in comic opera are like the country-folk. Surrey's just Greater London in a garden hat. A very clean, pretty, *soignée* Miss London, but London all the same. Why, it's chock-full of Londoners."

"Don't you sniff at London or Londoners. They're both just as dear in their way as *any* country."

"I have the greatest admiration and respect for London; but on a day like this . . ."

"You ought to be taking Simon for a walk, so I shall turn you out. If I'm going off for the whole day to-morrow, I must write two or three notes to people I half-promised to meet; and if I don't do them now they won't be in time."

Paul held the hand she gave him in both his for just a moment.

It was hard to go . . . but there was to-morrow. A long, lovely, undisturbed to-morrow. He had consulted Uncle Tom's barometer in Miss Stukely's "inner hall" before he came out, and the glass was "set fair."

As he raced back to Elm Tree Road, he felt as though he was walking on air. The golden light with its sparkling particles of dust was a fairy

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light, London an enchanted, a beneficently enchanted city. The pollarded elms inside Miss Stukely's garden-wall throbbed with spring. In the glimpses he got of little gardens as he passed, they all looked garlanded as for some great festival. He fetched the rejoicing Simon, and together they strolled in the less frequented parts of Regent's Park. It was well there were few people; or in his exalted state Paul would inevitably have collided with them in the most idiotic way. Straight forward did he go, in a dreaming ecstasy, looking neither right nor left.

For now he knew.

From the moment she had let him cover her hands with his while she looked so kindly into his eyes, he knew.

Nothing else mattered.

Complications! They only existed to be unravelled. Difficulties! They were placed there to be overcome. Her absorbing profession! He could share her with it, if only he might have that honest, tender-hearted, faithful understanding *me* she had spoken of, that delicious *me*—for his very own.

Everything would arrange itself if only she cared as he cared. As he hoped, he actually dared to believe she was beginning to care.

There would be embarrassments, perplexities even. People were tiresome. Lately he had come to think of all his friends of the pre-Allegra time as very tiresome indeed. There were a good many of his relations in London just then, and numerous friends had come up from the country

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for a bit of the season. He had to go to their parties and things, and he was astonished at the curious way in which they all seemed to regard the artists who ministered so largely to their pleasure.

Quite simply Allegra had told him that she would like to know more people who had nothing whatever to do with the theatre, because it would be good for her art. In consequence he had tried hard to interest some of his friends in her. They liked the theatre. They talked glibly of this star or that comedian. They were good-natured in all their references to various well-known actors and actresses when such happened to be mentioned. They were even sure they were all "quite nice." But as to wanting to know any of them —that never entered their well-dressed heads.

Actors and singers and writing-people were all very well in their own proper sphere, which sphere undoubtedly was to cater for the amusement of people who neither write, nor act, nor make music. These good friends of his didn't assume that their own way of life was better. But it was different. The two spheres could never impinge, could never by any conceivable process be interchangeable. The amusers were in one set, and those they amused in another. Paul found himself up against a solid wall of what was not so much prejudice as a pure incapacity to understand, when he made suggestions, or gave the broadest hints that he would like cards for this party or that for a friend of his, the young actress who was playing with such charm and distinction

Allegra

in *Little St. Germain*s. They ignored his hints and skilfully changed the direction of his suggestions.

He asked one of his aunts point-blank if she would let him bring Allegra to see her some Sunday afternoon, when she was always at home. His aunt was supposed to be advanced and particularly interested in every sort of culture. Her husband, too, was literary, though his worst enemy could not have called anything he wrote in the least entertaining. Still, they were, he and his wife, by way of patronising the Arts, and their two daughters, some years Paul's senior, were always spoken of as "most accomplished girls."

But Aunt Alice would have none of Allegra. She looked astonished; then, with an almost Christian Science smile, answered sweetly, "No, dear Paul, I think not. I have seen the young lady. I have the greatest admiration for her talents, but I fear your uncle would not like *you* to bring her."

"Why on earth not?" Paul demanded angrily.

"Well, you see . . . a good many people come to see us on Sundays, and it might give rise to that foolish gossip your uncle so much dislikes—gossip that would be very annoying to your people."

"Well, will you ask her if I stay away?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she exclaimed. "It would look as if I were running after a notoriety—which is a thing . . ."

"Notoriety!" Paul interrupted indignantly.
"What an extraordinary word to use!"

Allegra

"It's not the right word, I confess," his aunt apologised. "It's a little difficult to explain what I mean. You see, she's hardly celebrated—is she?—and yet she is beginning to be known as . . ."

"A particularly charming and clever artist," Paul again interrupted impatiently. "But if you don't want to know her—the loss is yours, my dear aunt. In a year or so she'll be so run after . . ."

"That, my dear Paul, is the very reason I don't wish to join in the pursuit. We never have run after people, for any reason whatever. We choose our friends."

His mother was not coming up at all that season. The squire only for the Derby and the Horse Show. Lucy would be staying for a fortnight with this very aunt, but not till the middle of June.

No, Paul had not been able to do anything for her socially, and he hated himself for it, as Allegra had been so hospitably ready to share all her friends with him.

Now. NOW things were going to be different. He would see to it that his princess should receive the recognition that was her due. He would force these stodgy, well-bred, well-meaning people to realise how delightful she was.

His hand was on Simon's collar as they strolled along together through that enchanted park. The golden light turned rosy as his dreams—those dear, ridiculous youthful dreams that never do

Allegra

have the smallest relation to life. And he and Simon were extremely late for dinner in Elm Tree Road.

"I wish dear Mr. Staniland would be rather more punctual," sighed Miss Diana. "Lately he really gets worse and worse. I wonder if I could speak to him on the subject?"

"I'm afraid he's born unmethodical," Miss Julia answered. "But there . . . one can't have everything, and he's most pleasant to do with, and so polite always. You remember that Mr. Ballantyre we had for two months once, who used to stand with his watch in his hand and ring, and ring, and ring, if a meal was a minute late; and criticised the bills so, and weighed everything, and never went out? You must confess it's much easier to do for Mr. Staniland."

Luckily, the Miss Stukelys slept soundly and did not hear or notice what time Paul went to bed that night. For he sat up till after two, writing verses in which he tried to describe Allegra as she had looked that afternoon.

They were not good verses, and he knew it, but he enjoyed writing them, and still more did he enjoy reading each fresh version to Simon, who was always equally appreciative every time.

Finally they shared some rather stale and crumby cracknels, and went up to bed.

CHAPTER XXI

A BOUT six o'clock next morning Paul stretched himself and opened his eyes. The sun shining in at the open window (he never drew down his blind) woke him for a minute to the realisation that something very pleasant lay ahead of him that day. Then he turned his back on the sun and went to sleep again.

Simon, lying on a rug at the far side of the room, heard his master move, lifted his head, and looked up.

Was that master in the mood to allow an affectionate dog to come and lie on the bed beside him?

It did happen very occasionally: but one had to watch and promptly seize the exactly auspicious moment.

Was this such an one?

It was Simon's passionate but seldom gratified desire to lie on beds. He had been beaten so many times for attempts to lie on the bed when Paul was not there, that he began to think the brief bliss enjoyed was hardly worth the subsequent smacks, or, what he minded far more, the ensuing social ostracism.

Miss Judy's second-sight seemed preternaturally acute where jumping on beds was concerned, and it never failed to puzzle Simon as to how it was that when, hearing her steps upon the stairs

Allegra'

(his hearing was much sharper than Miss Judy's), he leapt lightly off the bed and lay (looking respectable enough for a bench of Bishops) on his own rug right across the room—how, after one glance at the bed, she would advance upon him, severely admonish him, smack him (her smacks were negligible), and lead him ignominiously downstairs and through the back door, where she shut him out.

There was nothing Simon hated so much as to be shut out.

It was one thing to go out on his own account, to stroll leisurely through the open window of Paul's sitting-room and take up a dignified position on the lawn, where he could see his master writing, and, at the first pause in the busily-scratching pen, rush in and ask him to come for a walk. But quite another to be turned into the garden with no other companions than certain impertinent birds, always too concerned with their own affairs to take any notice of him.

Simon hated solitude. Failing Paul's society, he sought to drown his sorrow in the forbidden bed. Failing the bed, he liked to sit or walk with Miss Judy, whose conversation, though foolish, was kind and generally appreciative. He always wondered why Miss Judy didn't talk sense to him; but concluded that her mentality must be limited and that she did her best.

Simon was familiar with the works of the best authors, and with most of his master's works as well. For Paul, when any passage delighted him, either of his own or other people's, loved to de-

Allegra

claim it aloud; and if Simon happened to be in the garden when this happened, he always politely hastened in again, let himself down with a plump, breathed heavily and hung out his tongue as far as it would go, in token of his appreciation.

If Paul happened to laugh, Simon joined in with flail-like thumps of his tail.

Was Paul moved, as sometimes happened, almost to tears, Simon arose and hastened to his master and laid his great head very gently on Paul's knee; and Paul never failed to stroke the big kind head, for Simon was one of those rare souls who never mistake an author's pathos for humour.

Small wonder that he found a "diddums then" style of conversation somewhat boring; but his manners were too good for him to show it, and Miss Judy never realised that there was no need to "talk down" to Simon.

Meanwhile Simon watched the bed and cogitated. Paul's back was now towards him. A hunched shoulder, a long mound well to the side of the rather large bed, and an untidy head, were all Simon could see of him. But there was a nice clear space on the near side of the mound.

Simon arose quietly. He could move lightly as a sylph when it suited him. He reached his goal without inducing any further movement from the mound. Very gingerly he placed his paws on the edge of the bed, and, with a complicated movement of lightning speed and dexterity, took off and landed on the space presented alongside the motionless mound.

Allegra

If the going up of Simon had been as a feather, the coming down and settling in were of the nature of an earthquake, and nearly flung Paul out of bed, so violently did the springs in the mattress react to Simon's weight.

Again Paul turned, and opened his eyes; and Simon, watching like a lynx, knew he had chosen his moment well.

"Dear old idiot," murmured Paul, and flung a careless arm round Simon's neck. There was a minor earthquake as the great black body gave one quiver of ecstasy. And all was still again for a couple of hours, when an expostulating voice exclaimed:

"*You promised me, Mr. Staniland,* he shouldn't lie on the bed. Just look at the marks his paws have made."

Miss Judy always brought Paul's shaving-water herself. She thought "the girl" too young to do so, and if it were laid down outside his door he slept on till all hours.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Paul, opening one eye. "He must have crept up secretly and inserted himself while I was asleep. How very wrong of you, Simon!"

Miss Judy left the room, smiling broadly at the idea of such a monster as Simon "creeping up secretly," and Paul fell fast asleep again.

At nine o'clock a breakfast-bell rang loudly.

At half-past nine there came a violent knocking at Paul's door.

Simon, still enjoying the forbidden bed, raised his head and looked rather scandalised at such a disturbance.

Allegra

The knocking continued, and Paul sat up.
"Come in," he called amiably. "I'm not up."

Expostulatory explanations followed.

Paul rose; so did Simon.

It really was shockingly late.

By the time Paul got down to his belated breakfast it was ten o'clock. His letters were placed in a neat pile beside his plate, and there were a good many. He turned them over, looking at the envelopes, and came on one, with Bitley post-mark, in Albert's excellently clear, business-like handwriting.

What could Albert be writing to him about?

He opened it and read:

"DEAR SIR,

"I hope you will pardon the liberty I take in writing, but Dorcas thinks I ought to tell you as our little Danny is took very bad, and the doctor thinks he won't get over it. It is a sort of fever, and the poor child can't seem to rest. If he could sleep, the doctor says he might get better. He asks for you constant, and Dorcas did think as you ought to know. I hope you are in good health. Both Dorcas and me are well, only poor little Danny being so bad we are much upset, the doctor says it is internal inflammation.

"I am, sir,

"Yours respectfully,

"ALBERT DANCEY."

For a full minute Paul sat staring at the letter. He poured out some coffee and drank it hastily, consulted his watch and studied an ABC.

Allegra

There was a fast train to Marlehouse at 10.45. If he hustled he could, perhaps, just do it. Bitley was eight uphill miles from Marlehouse, but doubtless he could get a trap there of some sort.

He bolted a few mouthfuls of food, dragged on his boots, rang for Miss Stukely and told her he was suddenly called away, but hoped to be home that night. He wrote a long telegram to Allegra which he meant to send at Paddington.

Then he dashed out of the house and round by Lord's nearly to Upper Baker Street, hoping every moment to pick up a taxi. There were none on the stands, and each one he hailed seemed to have the flag down. At last, just at the top of Baker Street, he got one, and reached Paddington with exactly three minutes to spare. He had a rush for it, and boarded the train as it was beginning to move.

His mind was in a whirl and he was very much agitated.

It never entered his head that it would have been possible not to go.

They were his father's people, and therefore they were his. They were in trouble, and little Danny was asking for him "constant."

The roots of families who have lived for generations on the same land are deeply entwined. So profoundly buried is this hidden interlacing that its existence is never consciously acknowledged except under the stress of an overpowering emotion, which, pulling violently in some unforeseen direction, disturbs the fibres of other and wholly

Allegra

different roots—so that they, too, feel and yield to the tug of this mysterious force.

Generations of Stanilands had lived with generations of Albert Danceys and Dorcas Heavens; had trodden the same fields; watched and garnered the same harvests; tended and cared for the same kindly pastoral creatures. They had shot the same coverts, whether as squire or poacher; run with the same hounds, whether on horseback or afoot. Logs from the same trees had burnt upon their hearths in manor-house or cottage, and in the end they lay sleeping their last sleep in the same quiet churchyards.

Like pictures thrown upon a screen, memories of Dorcas and Albert came thronging into Paul's mind. Albert did not belong to their village, but he came from one not a couple of miles away, and the Staniland boys knew all the village lads within a wide radius.

Paul remembered Albert, big and gawky and shy, when he himself was very small indeed. Albert, in uncomfortable Sunday clothes, with handsome, sunburnt face and the light eyes that twinkled irresponsibly even at moments when otherwise the solemnity of his aspect would have been overpowering. Albert in working-clothes, that suited him so much better. That ancient jacket with the capacious concertina pockets containing an inexhaustible supply of varied and entrancing things, from catapults to ferrets. No one, in those days, could manufacture such catapults as Albert, deadly in their aim as they were contraband. No one was more ready to supply

Allegra

them; for as fast as one of these inimitable weapons was confiscated by the justly incensed authorities, Albert produced another from the ferret-dwelling pocket; and to this day these two apparently unrelated objects were inseparably associated in Paul's mind. And he couldn't conceive of a catapult that didn't smell of ferrets.

Dorcas, too, as a young under-nurse, unbending occasionally to play like one of the children she "minded," conscientiously dragging herself back to the dignity of grown-up standing. Dorcas, soft-hearted and of a condoning and, what was even more important, a concealing nature—where scrapes were concerned that seriously affected garments, reserved for occasions when scrapes were supposed to be impossible, as they never were.

Albert, steady and responsible, with his uncle at Bitley, sixteen long miles across country from the Court; miles which he walked sometimes "of a Saturday" to see Dorcas, returning to his work on Sunday afternoon. Albert, as proud third-lifer in the lease of the Black Lamb; and Dorcas prim and inexpressibly shy as his bride.

Then came two babies who died in infancy, to the good couple's inexpressible sorrow; and after three more years, Danny, strong and beautiful and beloved.

And now it looked as if Danny, too, were to be taken from them.

Paul felt he couldn't bear it.

With his own hands he would hold the baby back. That valorous small soul should not, if he

Allegra

could help it, embark on the "very great adventure" which would carry him so far from the kind, simple pair who worshipped him.

"He asks for you constant." Paul felt that he would sacrifice almost anything to give the baby what he asked for.

Surely Allegra would understand? Surely she would sympathise? And then, with a sense almost of horror, he remembered that he had never sent the telegram.

Allegra would wait for him, would think him casual, rude even. Or, worse, she might be worried and anxious and think some accident had befallen him. And the express didn't stop at all till Swindon. She couldn't possibly hear from him before afternoon.

He cursed himself for a fool not to have got the Miss Stukelys to send a note. He fussed and fumed and fidgeted till the other passengers wished that most restless young man anywhere rather than where he was. At last the train reached Swindon, and there he remembered that he had left all his other letters unopened on the breakfast-table.

It was half-past one when he got to Marlehouse, a little country town where no motors or taxis were to be obtained. He went to the chief hotel, and while the horse was being put in got some lunch. It seemed a very long eight miles to Bitley, for the inn cob went but slowly and the hills were steep. When they reached Bitley the grandfather clock in the kitchen at the Black Lamb was striking three.

Allegra'

Paul was almost afraid to look at the front of the house lest the blinds should be down, but it all seemed much as usual. As the horse stopped, Dorcas came out from the door.

"I felt it in my bones as you would come, Master Paul," she said simply, "if you did get Albert's letter; but we couldn't be sure where you were."

"How is he? How is Danny?" Paul asked anxiously, scanning her face. The familiar fresh-coloured face looked much as usual, except that there were big black shadows under her eyes.

"About the same," she said with a brave attempt at a smile. "'E don't take nothing an' 'e don't sleep, an' he keeps on continual about some piece as you did use to say to 'im, and none on us know what it be."

Dorcas spoke more carefully as a rule, and rather scorned the broad Garseshire of her youth, especially to customers. But at that moment she was entirely natural, and Paul's heart went out to her as he heard the dear, familiar, ugly dialect of his own country.

"You say the little chap wanted me?"

"I ain't exactly sure as it's you he wants, sir," Dorcas confessed rather confusedly, "but it's summat as you did use to say to 'im. Some sort of poetry, we do think. He can't seem to rest, an' 'e do keep on something dreadful. He won't lie in his cot; Albert or me 'as to nurse 'im all the time. You go in, sir, and you"—to the driver—"come along of me and put the 'orse up for a bit, and Albert'll bring 'un a feed and I'll see as you gets summat. What about you, Master Paul?"

Allegra

Paul assured Dorcas he had lunched, and he went into the house and up the stairs to the best bedroom, the one he always had himself at the Black Lamb. There he found Albert walking to and fro with a hot, restless little bundle in his arms, while a feeble, persistent voice kept saying, "Sing 'Pompus Teeple,' Daddie! Do sing 'Pompus Teeple.'"

"I don't know what you do mean, Danny, my lamb," Albert murmured apologetically, "an' I ain't much of a singer at any time." Albert spoke very softly, as though he were in church.

"Sing 'Pompus Teeple,'" the weak little voice repeated. "Mitta Paul singed it."

"Why, here is Mr. Paul hisself," Albert exclaimed, though still in the queer hushed voice so unlike his usual hearty tones. "Come all the way from London for to see you."

Paul's heart sank. Had he "come all the way from London," only to fail Danny when he arrived?

What on earth was "Pompus Teeple"?

"Look at Mr. Paul, lovey," Albert continued. "I told you as 'e'd come when you wanted him. Look, Danny, yer 'e is!"

Albert sat down suddenly in a chair and raised Danny a little, so that he could see Paul as he bent over them both.

Such a hectic, sadly shrunken little Danny, but he turned his big blue eyes on Paul and held out his thin little arms, saying, "Cally."

Paul took him from his father and laid the hot, heavy little head against his shoulder. Danny

Allegra

settled down quite comfortably for a minute as Paul started to walk about—then began the eternally reiterated demand for “Pompus Teeple.”

“Danny,” Paul said imploringly, “are you quite sure I know it?”

“Yes,” said the baby firmly, “you singed it. Oh, *do* sing ‘Pompus Teeple’ again!”

“Danny”—again was Paul’s voice most beseeching—“there must be more of it. What comes after Pompus teeple?”

“Goes a chee,” Danny whispered hoarsely.

“Pompus teeple goes a chee,” Paul repeated hopelessly. “Yes, and then?”

“Apples,” Danny whispered helpfully.

“A was an Apple Pie,” Paul began, when Danny interrupted with a wail: “No, *not* a pie. Pompus teeple—do sing ‘Pompus Teeple’!”

Albert covered his ears with his hands. Dorcas, who had appeared in the doorway, lifted her apron to her eyes.

“*As can be,*” Danny continued with great emphasis.

The jumbled jigsaw danced before Paul’s dazzled eyes, when suddenly the pieces sorted themselves and fell into place.

“I’ve got it,” he said. “Listen, Danny, my son,” and he began to sing the old nursery rhyme that is set in *The Babies’ Opera* to the tune of a peal of bells:

“Upon Paul’s steeple grows a tree
As full of apples as can be;
The little boys of London town
They take a stick and knock them down,
They take a stick and knock them down.”

Allegra

"Adain!" the weak little voice commanded, and this time the wail had gone out of it.

Up and down the room marched Paul, carrying the now contented Danny and singing "Pompus Teeple" over and over again, till at last he felt the little figure relax in his arms, and, looking down, saw that the child had fallen asleep.

He sang more and more softly and moved more slowly. Albert had crept from the room ten minutes before Paul ceased to sing. Dorcas watched hungrily, nervously, lest this newly-imported nurse should cease the lullaby before Danny was fairly off.

But Paul persevered till he had walked up and down several times without singing at all and Danny never stirred.

Dorcas turned back the clothes of Danny's cot, which was in the room, and motioned to Paul to lay him in it. He did so, holding his breath. Danny lay quite still, and Dorcas covered him. She sat down by the cot, and motioned to Paul to go.

Paul stole away and closed the door softly behind him.

At the foot of the stairs Albert was waiting for him, and led him into the bar.

"You come along o' me, sir, and 'ave a mug of ale. You must be dry after all that singin'. We're greatly be'olden to you, sir. 'Pompus Teeple' indeed! My stars! good fathers! 'Ow-ever did you come to think on it?'"

Paul sank exhausted upon the settle: "Upon my word, Albert, I don't know. I was in despair at first, and then, mercifully, it came to me."

Allegra

"Sir," said Albert, as he handed his guest a foaming tankard, "as I says, we're greatly be'olden to you, Dorcas an' me, coming so far, and all the notice you've took of Danny. But if I may make so bold as to ask you another favour, top of all as you've done—it be as you don't never tell that child nothin' more unless you informs Dorcas what book it be in and where she can lay hands on the book. We've 'ad a most terrible four days, and I swears to you, solemn, if you 'adn't a' come—whether Danny did get over it or not, his father wouldn't. I'd a bin took to the 'sylum before night, that I would."

Albert was standing in front of Paul, and clasped his forehead as though he still feared for his own sanity.

Paul took a long, comforting draught of Cripps's cold brown ale, and nodded at Albert over the edge of the tankard.

"You may thank your lucky stars, my man, that the blessed rhyme *was* in a book. If it had been something out of my head, I couldn't have remembered a word of it, and then we *should* have been dished—utterly done for—all of us."

"For the Lord's sake, sir," Albert gasped, "don't you get tellin' him no more such fandanglements. I've bin to London once on a bank 'oliday, and I seen St. Paul's Cathedral, an' 'e ain't got no steeple, 'e be round on top like a bee-skep—'Pompus Teeple' indeed! I'd pompus 'im as did write that there, if I'd got 'un 'ere. Down-right lies, I call it."

"But it had a steeple when that rhyme was written," Paul explained.

Allegra

"Steeple or no steeple, there wasn't no apples a-growin' there, I'll be bound. So that's lies, sir, any'ow."

And nothing that Paul could say in defence of the unknown author of "Pompus Teeple" could bring Albert to a more charitable frame of mind. Presently Dorcas came down with the cheering intelligence that Danny was still asleep, and that his skin was damp and the fever had left him.

They so entirely took it for granted that Paul would stay overnight that he simply dared not suggest going back to town that evening, and Albert volunteered to drive him over to Marle-house for the first up-train in the morning.

Later in the evening the doctor came, and declared that little Danny, with the inconsequent determination of infancy, had turned his face up-hill again, and Danny himself demanded "dinky minky" with the same persistence that he had demanded "Pompus Teeple" every hour of the previous three days—a want Dorcas joyfully supplied from a small feeding-cup with a spout.

The country post went out at two from Bitley, so there was no use writing to Allegra.

Paul wandered in the woods and dreamed of her.

It was the hundredth performance of *Little St. Germains*, and he was not there to give "Mellory" a white rose.

CHAPTER XXII

ALLEGRA, too, woke early on that Friday morning with the sense that something pleasant lay ahead of her that day. But, unlike Paul, she did not fall asleep again, and lay thinking; for Allegra had a good deal to think about just then.

For some weeks she had been conscious that Maythorne's manner grew more *empressé* every time they met, and that their meetings were as frequent as he could make them. Had she accepted all his invitations, she would hardly ever have lunched in her own rooms or with anybody else. Five Sundays running she had spent at Wellclose. Matthew himself fetched her, and as often as not brought her back to London in his car. The friendly interest of an elderly man—Allegra, with the arrogance of three-and-twenty, had set him down as elderly when she first knew him—could hardly account for so plainly-manifested a desire to be constantly in her society, and to be seen in it. It was the latter fact that was conclusive proof of his devotion to those who knew him a great deal better than she did.

She frankly liked him. She liked his rather flamboyant homage. She liked the luxury of his setting and his constant presents of flowers and

Allegra

expensive chocolates. She enjoyed going with him to smart restaurants where he pointed out what he called "other celebrities," and she was innocently pleased to be seen in them herself. She felt that being so seen was a sort of tribute to the Gift she so truly reverenced. For Paul was right—she was not conceited; about that "other me" she spoke of she was humble and diffident; but she knew she could act, and she loved anything that in any way showed public appreciation of this power that was in her. Therefore was she pleased as Maythorne himself, when she read in the *Society Gossip* of "Mrs. X" or "Miss Y" that, "Miss Allegra Burford was among the lunchers at the Savoy yesterday, in most becoming dark blue georgette with grey embroidery, and a large grey hat trimmed with blue pansies; a costume that proves she can look as charming in modern clothes as in those of the sixties." She always cut these paragraphs out, but she didn't show them to Paul.

Her feeling for Paul was quite different. He interested and exasperated her by turns. She believed that he had it in him to do really good work. Work that would be *recognised* as good. Allegra had no use for work that wasn't. He irritated her because she thought he was not keen enough. Also, in the very back of her mind she had a tiny grudge against him because he seemed to her ungenerous in his attitude towards *Little St. Germain*s. Although his interest in and enthusiasm for the smallest details of the acting never cooled or abated, he appeared singularly

Allegra

lukewarm in his appreciation of the play as a play.

No one in her hearing had ever so much as questioned the actual authorship of the play—perhaps because she and Maythorne were known to be “such pals”; and when she contrasted Maythorne’s readiness to give Paul every credit for his work “on” the play, with Paul’s attitude as regarded the play itself, she felt he compared unfavourably with Maythorne. She was sorry; for in all other respects he struck her as entirely frank and generous, with a most endearing charm of manner. She liked his manners better than Maythorne’s. She liked his way of speaking and she loved his laugh. Lately, too, she had felt more comfortable with Paul than with Maythorne—more safe, somehow, more at ease.

But the previous afternoon she had been conscious that there was in Paul’s manner the same subtly disturbing element that she had felt in Maythorne’s. And it was more perturbing because it roused in herself an overpowering curiosity to know what it would be like to be made love to by Paul. She knew that if he had kissed her when he held her hands in his she would have let him; and with her usual honesty she confessed to herself she would have liked him to kiss her. Was this *it*, then? The mysterious, wonderful feeling vaunted by poets, novelists, and playwrights. Was something so big going to happen to her that nothing else could matter? Was she going to fall in love at last?

She called it “at last,” for she had been rather

Allegra

disappointed hitherto at her own inability to feel any of the vaunted thrills and excitations except when she was somebody else.

Was that "other me" going to have a chance at last?

She snuggled down among her pillows and felt again the clasp of Paul's hands as they lay on hers when she held the lapels of his coat. He had nice hands, very gentle hands, sensitive and strong.

A shaft of sunshine through the side of the wind-stirred blind thrust in like a message.

Allegra had to draw down her blinds, or people on the opposite side of the road could have seen her in bed. Such a May morning for a long day in the country! Oh, it was good to be young and strong and clever and successful, and to be going to meet an interesting somebody who admired you very much. Somebody who, doubtless, had delicious and agitating things to say where it was most fitting that he should say them—amidst grass and trees and flowers. For if Allegra always associated Maythorne with smart restaurants and crowds of well-dressed people who talked loudly in a vain endeavour to drown the band, so did she always best picture Paul in an environment of gardens, woods, or the stillness of some "great good place."

It seemed quite a long morning till half-past eleven, when Paul was due. She dressed carefully in a thin, light grey tailor-made coat and skirt, the most expensive coat and skirt she had ever had, severely plain, with beautiful lines,

Allegra

with a white silk shirt and little grey hat that had two white wings like a Mercury's cap. She had heard Paul say scornful things of people who wore the wrong clothes in the country, and was determined he should have no fault to find with her. She had put on thick shoes and grey stockings, and stood on a chair to see them in the rather meagre glass on her dressing-table. She was ready to her very gloves at eleven o'clock.

Half-past eleven! At last he was due. She longed to look out of her bedroom window to see if he were coming, but didn't, lest he should see her.

Perhaps her clock was fast? No, her wrist-watch agreed with the clock, and it was a reliable watch. Her guardian had given it to her, and it was a good one.

Twenty minutes to twelve! Paul *was* late. She had never known him late for any appointment with her before.

She took up a book and tried to read, but she couldn't concentrate upon it and kept looking at the clock.

At twelve o'clock she began to get angry. By half-past twelve she was furious; and then extremely anxious.

What could have happened to him?

She had told her landlady she would be out for both lunch and tea, and she was far too proud to own that her escort had failed her. She went out, and lunched alone dismally in an A.B.C. quite near her rooms. She tried to be as long as she could over the meal, but it is difficult to be

Allegra

slow when you have ordered very little and are not in the least hungry, with a lump in your throat and a smarting at the back of your eyes; and in your heart a nameless fear that something horrid has happened to somebody you care for. Her aunt's teaching was a much stronger influence than Allegra realised, or she would have gone to Paul's rooms in Elm Tree Road to ask about him. Something held her back.

She returned to her rooms and let herself in very quietly, met no one on the staircase, and went into her sitting-room, certain that by this time there must be a message of some sort.

Nothing.

And it was only half-past one.

At a quarter to two Paul's long, confused telegram arrived.

This time there was no question about Allegra's feelings. The very fact that she had been so anxious made her the more angry and indignant now.

He had broken his engagement with her without explanation or apology because Danny happened to be ill.

Danny! an unimportant baby, child of a country innkeeper and his wife!

That the wife happened to be Paul's old nurse meant nothing to Allegra. She had never had a nurse herself, and Paul's feeling for all the folk he had grown up amongst was incomprehensible to her.

Had it been his father or mother or Lucy, she would have understood it; though even then it

Allegra

would have been only polite to send her word before he got to Swindon.

The more she thought of it, the more inexplicably casual his conduct appeared.

She sat very still on the mauve sofa. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears and her cheeks flushed with indignation.

She had not been on the stage for five years without knowing that there did exist young men—young men of Paul's class, too—who considered an actress fair game, who reserved for the profession a particular species of admiration quite separate from that they offered to sheltered girls in the same social position as themselves. But they were not very numerous, she imagined, nor had she ever come across one of them herself.

Could Paul be so hopelessly stupid and misguided as to imagine he could treat her in that sort of fashion?

No; angry as she was, she couldn't believe that of him. All she had ever seen of him flouted any such idea. Still, nothing could alter the fact that he had failed her, failed her at a time, too, when one would have thought *nothing* could have kept him away.

They had often talked together of their first meeting at Bitley; but Paul seldom mentioned the Danceys, because he knew that Dorcas had talked about him to Allegra, and this knowledge made him feel an ass and a bore when Dorcas was mentioned. He seldom spoke of his home, and Allegra had no conception of the deep affection with which the whole family regarded "the

Allegra

place," nor the claim they felt their own people to have upon them. What she knew of Paul's people and his father's place she had heard from Maythorne, who declared they were "quite out of the top drawer"; and his father to be a man of "considerable property." "All of 'em in Burke."

Except in answer to direct questions, Paul did not talk of his people.

When he first met Allegra she certainly saw life in terms of Allegra, and he had been quite happy so to see it with her; and talk about whatever interested her most, which certainly was Allegra. Lately she had extended her interest to his work, and it was this kindness on her part that had fanned the smouldering flame of his feeling for her to a hot blaze of very real and sincere passion.

But she didn't know this.

Hurt, sore, angry, and more than a little puzzled, she changed her dress and went and sat in Regent's Park till tea-time, when she went back and made tea for herself alone in her room.

She heard a postman's knock, and ran down the three flights of stairs to see if there was a letter for her from Paul with further explanations. There was a letter for her, but it was from Maythorne, begging her to go and have supper with him after the play, to celebrate the hundredth performance. He would be at the theatre, would take her away in his car and bring her back to her rooms. He was sleeping in town. He had a *pied-a-terre* in the Adelphi. She need not answer. She *must* come.

Allegra

If Paul got back for the show that night she might forgive him; but she would certainly punish him by going out to supper with Maythorne. Perhaps Maythorne had a party and would ask Paul too. He was very good-natured and hospitable, and *he* was never casual where she was concerned.

She began to feel very kindly towards Maythorne. She remembered a hundred nice things he had done for her. She thought tenderly of the children, of how affectionate they were, of how pleasant and restful it always was at Wellclose, that eminently well-appointed house. Even Becky came in for a share of her appreciation, that shrewd, sensible woman, of whom Maythorne always took care she should see as little as possible.

Maythorne's note made her feel less neglected and miserable. If she had mistaken Paul's feeling for her—she blushed hotly at the humiliating thought—he should certainly never know it.

If he chose to be casual, she would be casual too. In any case, he should not have the chance again to leave her in the lurch.

A young man who rushed off to the ends of the earth every time someone else's baby had indigestion was not to be depended upon.

Allegra hardened her heart against Paul and got ready for the theatre. After all, there was always that. Neither freakish young men nor fractious babies could take that from her.

As she went in at the familiar stage-door that night, she felt as though the whole building held out kind, friendly arms to her.

Allegra

Never had she loved the theatre more. Never had she acted better; and after the minuet a magnificent bouquet of long-stemmed roses from Maythorne awaited her in her dressing-room.

Paul was not in the theatre. He had not troubled to come back.

Really, he was rather impossible. You never knew what he would or would not do. Yet she was sorry he had not seen her play "Mellory" that night. With all his faults, he appreciated fine shades.

The house was crowded. *Little St. Germain's* was certainly going strong.

It was pleasant to sail away in a motor instead of going home by tube. As yet only when very tired did Allegra allow herself the luxury of a taxi. She was hungry, too, for she had had little to eat all day. By the time she had drunk some champagne she was certain she had quite mistaken her own feeling for Paul, whatever his might be for her.

There was no mistaking Matthew's feeling for her. She began to think of him as Matthew before she had finished her first glass of champagne.

How pretty it was at the Savoy. How gay. There were lots of people there whom she knew, and they all looked arch when they saw her with Maythorne. He was at no pains to conceal his infatuation. Matthew had taken the plunge. He was honestly, hopelessly, fathoms deep in love, and he didn't care who knew it. In fact, the more people who knew it, the better he would be pleased. He understood exactly what King

Allegra

Cophetua must have felt. "If she hasn't got money or family, she has got genius, and that's enough for me," he told himself, "in front," during the last act.

As the lights went down and the great concourse of people flocked out into the courtyard to find their motors, he drew Allegra's hand through his arm. He had told his chauffeur where to wait, and found the car at once, put her into it, gave the man some rather lengthy directions, got in himself, and the car slid into the Strand.

Allegra trembled as he took his place beside her, put his arm round her, and whispered hoarsely, "You must love me, for I worship you!"

She suddenly felt weak and tired and quite incapable of disengaging that encircling arm. She was not even sure that she cared to.

She made no answer, and he bent his face to hers. His kiss fell upon her ear, and he smiled happily, for, like Private Mulvaney, he knew what this signified: that, except upon the stage, which didn't count, she had never been so kissed by a man before.

"I want you for my wife," he whispered. "Together we can do wonderful things, and I can make life so much easier for you, my darling."

"I'm not sure," she faltered.

"Yes, you are; you are quite sure. We are made for one another. It is ordained. Kiss me."

The car had gone a very long way round before it stopped at Allegra's door.

Allegra

Regardless of the chauffeur, Maythorne took her in his arms and kissed her yet again as she stood on the pavement.

Upstairs in her room she sat in front of the meagre looking-glass, taking down her heavy coils of hair and staring at her own reflection.Flushed face, bright eyes, tremulous, newly-kissed mouth.

This was *it*, then. She had felt it at last.

Yet if this she had been feeling was the supreme and overwhelming *it*—why had she been conscious all the time of a secret satisfaction that Paul would be so furious if he knew?

Their engagement would be in the papers tomorrow night. Matthew said so.

What did Paul matter?

CHAPTER XXIII

PAUL got into Paddington after midday, and drove straight to Allegra's rooms, as she seldom lunched out on matinée days. But the little servant told him Miss Burford was both lunching and dining out that day, and was going away for the week-end after the play that night. But she would be back for a few minutes between the matinée and the evening show.

The servant liked Paul. She had opened the door to him so often, and he was generous with his tips.

He returned to the taxi rather crestfallen. That morning he had been so cheerful, for Danny had slept all night, and with the amazing resilience of infancy seemed almost himself again, so much so that Dorcas could find it in her heart to rebuke him for his extreme wilfulness. The good couple were so proud and joyful, and Paul longed to share their great relief and his with Allegra. Allegra, the tender, understanding Allegra he had parted from a long two days ago. He hungered to see her, to hear her voice, to get back again into that mysterious and beautiful relation that had existed between them when they parted.

He knew that she was going to Wellclose for Sunday. Perhaps he would turn up there himself on Sunday afternoon. He had a standing in-

Allegra

vitation from Maythorne to go out on Sundays, but had never availed himself of it unless specially asked, as he had been far too often for his peace of mind. For every time he went Maythorne brought the conversation round to the next play they were to do together: even asking his opinion as to which of the novels they should "tackle" next—Maythorne always spoke of "tackling" his work.

And, so far, Paul had never found courage to tell him that, having, for his sins, read *Riches are Sorrow*, he had sworn a solemn oath never to sully his taste by reading another book by the same productive hand.

He drove straight to Elm Tree Road, deciding that he would go to the matinée, see Allegra behind for a few minutes, and bring her back to her rooms.

The theatre was very full, but he managed to get a seat right at the back of the dress-circle, next a gangway, and sent a note to her: "May I come round after the second act, and take you home after the show? I *must* see you."

Allegra's arrival at the theatre had been a whirl of congratulations and excitement, for Matthew had lost no time in publishing abroad their engagement. He had spent part of the morning with her, had taken her out to lunch, and before that his secretary had been rushing about London with paragraphs for the papers. She had slept badly, was nervous, restless, and tired; for Matthew in his happiness was somewhat overpowering. She had forbidden him to come near the

Allegra

theatre that afternoon, as she felt he was getting on her nerves. But till she got Paul's note she had not realised how dreadfully afraid she was of meeting him.

Since her young girlhood at Oxford, when she certainly had been in considerable awe of her aunt, she had prided herself on fearing nobody.

She fought with the feeling now, but could not overcome it. She guessed that he had only just got back and didn't know of her engagement.

Somebody *must* tell him before she saw him again.

There seemed no use in proclaiming to herself that, after all, her engagement was no business of Paul's; that she had no reason to think it was of any particular moment to him. She kept telling herself this without avail. It didn't make her feel one bit braver.

She stood twisting the note between her slender fingers, uncertain what to do; and before she had decided, the call came for her to go on.

"Mellory" enchanted Paul afresh every time he saw her, and that day there seemed to him to be a new and subtly dominating note in Allegra's rendering of the part. She was more girlish, more divinely timid and valorous by turns. There certainly were fine shades in her acting that even he had not fully appreciated before.

Wonderful, dear Allegra! with the delicate, unerring *taste* in everything she did and said.

Paul glowed with appreciation and delight.

Meanwhile that "other me" trembled and quaked and temporised.

Allegra

In the interval an attendant brought Paul a hastily-scribbled note: "Don't come behind between the acts, please. I am dreadfully tired. I'll see you after the show, if you like, but you mustn't come home with me. I *must* rest, or I shall be no good to-night."

Paul was puzzled.

Could she be angry with him about yesterday? And if she was, hadn't she a very good right to be so? He must have kept her waiting for hours. But for his abominable habit in oversleeping himself, he could have explained the whole thing to her properly before he had started. Perhaps she had been worried, and it had made her ill. He felt a brute, and cursed himself for an inconsiderate fool.

Yes: she was assuredly hurt and angry, and she had every right to be both.

Suddenly he saw her view of the whole proceeding, and the vision was so blinding that he was hardly conscious of the second act, though it had gone with even more spirit than usual, and Allegra's call had been enthusiastic. His mind was in a ferment of self-reproach and anxiety. In the interval, to calm his jangled nerves, he went out into the foyer to smoke.

There he was joined by a young stockbroker called Reid, whom he had met at Dallas Flint's.

"Wonderful run that piece is having," said Reid. "I brought my mother up this afternoon, else you don't often catch me indoors on a Saturday afternoon. That Miss Burford's jolly good. Quite a romance, too, her engagement

Allegra

. . . but I wonder what she'll say when she finds him out."

"I don't understand," Paul said stupidly. "What engagement? do you mean her getting this part, straight from the provinces?"

Reid looked surprised, and said: "Haven't you heard? It's all over town to-day and in the papers. She's going to marry Maythorne, the chap who's supposed to have written the play she's in—and most certainly didn't, judging by his other work."

"No," said Paul very quietly. "I hadn't heard. You're quite sure it isn't one of the usual rumours?"

"Well, Maythorne himself told a chap in the club to-day."

"Ah!" said Paul. "Did he?—I've been out of town."

"Doesn't seem to have done you much good. You're looking awfully seedy."

"The theatre seems a bit stuffy this afternoon," Paul said, still in that curiously toneless voice. "I think I'll cut the last act and go out into the air."

"Sure you're all right?" Reid asked rather anxiously. "Won't you come and have a drink?"

Paul shook his head. "I always go queer if it's close," he said, trying to smile with stiff, white lips. "I'll be all right directly I get outside." And he went.

But before he left the theatre he scribbled a note to Allegra on a page of his notebook and sent it to her dressing-room: "Since you are so

Allegra

tired, I won't bother you this afternoon. I have just heard your news, and realise how much occupied you must be. I will defer my abject apologies about yesterday till you give me leave to make them."

She should not have reason to find fault with his manners again.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN Paul's note was brought to Allegra in her dressing-room, she did not experience the relief one would have expected. She had dreaded seeing him quite unspeakably; yet now she knew she was not to see him, she had the curious sense of having been done out of a great third act, in which she was to have played the star part; and, however trying and exhausting such a part might be, when it was cut out of the bill altogether she felt flat and disappointed.

She was devoured by curiosity as to how Paul would take her engagement. Going home in the taxi that afternoon (she was so very tired that she allowed herself a taxi), she read and re-read his note, in the hope of discovering, between the lines, some clue to his attitude. He did not, it is true, congratulate her, but, then, neither did he reproach her.

Of course, he had nothing to reproach her for, but people are often unreasonable. Surely it was unfriendly not to congratulate her.

She wished she had told Matthew she would not dine out. She didn't like dining out before the evening show. Matthew was dear and devoted, but he must learn that nothing, *nothing* could ever be allowed which would interfere with her work or in any way reduce her efficiency.

Allegra

They were to motor out to Wellclose straight from the theatre that night, and she would insist on going to bed directly she arrived.

Oh, how tired she was!

Later, she lay on her bed, relaxing all her muscles as she had taught herself to do, and trying, unsuccessfully, to make her mind a blank. But all sorts of futile speculations came thronging there like ill-bred, inquisitive, unwanted people looking over a wall.

Would her aunt be pleased? She hoped her aunt would be pleased, but she was never very sure how her aunt would take anything.

What would the little girls say, and that sensible Miss Starr?

How astonished Rosa would be!

The company at the Congreve had not seemed particularly surprised, but they were all most cordial. Only Richard Black had looked at her in a queer, quizzical sort of way. She wondered why.

Miss Duval had said, "Well, my dear, I hope you'll find him all you think him."

What did she think him? She wasn't sure.

She shut her eyes, but instead of the enveloping nothingness she hoped for, she found herself looking into other eyes dark and bright, fringed with long black lashes: eyes that gazed into hers with a look that made her tremble. They had no business there, those eyes, so she opened hers and they vanished. Matthew's eyes were blue. At least, she thought they were blue. She wasn't quite sure what colour they were.

Allegra

Oh, dear! a quarter to seven. She must get up and change.

When Matthew arrived, very punctually, to fetch her, he brought her engagement-ring. Three big diamonds set in platinum; fine stones that sparkled gloriously on her slender little hand.

He put it on her finger and kissed her, and hoped it was the first of many rings he would give her.

She was much pleased, for she loved presents, and she had never possessed anything so beautiful as this. Yet she was firm in forbidding him to come behind and see her during the piece, and she refused to drink any champagne at dinner.

When the performance was over she came to him very quickly, wrapped in her heavy coat. Her suitcase was already on the motor, and they were well on their way half an hour after the curtain went down.

"Darling," Matthew said, "you mustn't take off your ring, ever. I noticed you hadn't it on to-night. Why?"

"Oh, I couldn't wear it as 'Mellory,'" she said earnestly; "it would be quite out of character . . . she was very poor, you know; it says they'd sold everything of value long ago. It would be all wrong—out of the picture."

"I don't like your taking it off. . . . What does it matter if it is out of the picture? When you're married you won't take off your wedding-ring, so why take off this?" Matthew persisted. "I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but if you want me to

Allegra

wear anything all the time, it must be very simple and inconspicuous. 'Mellory' with huge diamonds flashing about would be utterly absurd. . . . I couldn't act."

"Darling," Matthew said again, this time with a tinge of reproof in his voice, "then I'm afraid you care for the part more than for me."

"I care for the part more than for anything in the world, when I'm in it," she said firmly, "and you must never expect anything different from me. If I play a great lady, I'll wear my beautiful ring gladly, but I'll never wear anything that would make me conscious of any outside influence. . . . I couldn't. You mustn't ask me, Matthew."

"Well, well," Matthew said tolerantly, "you'll feel differently by-and-by, I expect. I've noticed you never wear any rings at all. Haven't you got any?"

"Only three. One that my guardian gave me, and two that belonged to my mother. They're very plain little rings, and I was afraid I'd lose them if I was always taking them off and on."

"And what about this? Aren't you even more likely to lose this? and it's valuable, you know."

"I'll try not to lose it," she said, and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder; "but if I do . . . you'll have to give me another."

"I'll give you any mortal thing you want," said Matthew. "You've only to ask, to have."

She twisted the ring on her finger and held it up to catch the light from the lamps. Matthew seized the pretty hand and kissed it, and then,

Allegra

as he held her close, she whispered, "Matthew, I want you to promise me something."

"What? Is it pearls you want?"

"No, no; nothing of that sort. I want you to promise me—to promise me solemnly—that you'll never interfere with my profession . . . that you won't be jealous of it, that you won't want to take me away from it."

"Oh, well . . . for the present. . . . Of course, I'd like you to be a bit better known before you give it up . . . but later on . . ."

"Listen, Matthew. There can never be any 'later on' as far as that is concerned. . . . All I can give you, apart from it, I will—but . . ."

"Let the future take care of itself," cried Matthew, and he felt like one of his own heroes. "To-night is ours."

Rebecca Starr was sitting up for them when they reached Wellclose, and supper was ready. Allegra enjoyed the daintily-served meal in the quiet dining-room, with its shaded lights, flowers, and solid, pseudo-Jacobean furniture. She was so tired that she begged to go to bed directly, and Rebecca led her to a big chintzy bedroom that possessed a white-tiled bathroom leading out of it. Everything looked most beautifully fresh and clean; and the silence everywhere seemed to lift Allegra with great, kind, soothing arms into the still peace that had been denied to her before. Her tense nerves ceased to jangle and thrum; and directly she lay down between the lavender-scented sheets she slid into a blessed, dreamless sleep.

Allegra

When she awoke, the blinds were flopping gently, the room still rather dark, and outside sounded the soft, persistent patter of heavy rain. She thought it must be very early until, raising herself on her elbow, she saw that on the little table by her side was a tray with tea, and against the teapot a bit of paper stood, with the pencil message: "You looked so tired last night that I told Royce not to wake you if you were asleep. Will you ring when you'd like your breakfast?—R. S."

She touched the little green teapot. It was quite cold, and at that moment the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten.

She leapt out of bed, pulled up the blinds, plaited her hair in one long, thick pigtail, washed her face, donned a delicious little Dutch cap of lace with wired wings, put on a filmy dressing-jacket, skipped back into bed, and rang the bell.

She felt rested and well and happy, with a childlike joy in being lazy and luxurious, while all the time, at the back of her brain, like the pleasantest refrain, was the thought, "And all this, presently, will be mine . . . for always."

Meanwhile, Matthew downstairs thought it was more than time Allegra should be getting up. The rain still poured down outside, and his little girls had followed him into his study.

"Daddy," said Pen, "are you going to see Miss Burford in bed? Can we come with you? Becky wouldn't let us go before because she was asleep, but her breakfast went up long ago, so she must be awake by now. So can we go? I want to see her."

Allegra

"I've seen her," Polly announced importantly, "but she didn't see me. I stood in the doorway while Royce took her breakfast in. She looks nice in bed. Some people look awful. I've seen them—no teeth and next to no hair. Shall we all come and see her?"

"I expect she's getting up by now," Matthew said, "and before she comes down I've something very serious to say to you. . . ."

"Yes, Daddy?" Polly remarked encouragingly, as Matthew had paused. "Something serious . . . go on."

Matthew cleared his throat. "Miss Burford," he began, and stopped again.

"Something serious about Miss Burford?" Pen chimed in. "What has *she* been doing?"

"She has promised to marry me and be your new—mother."

"She doesn't look much like anybody's mother," Polly said critically.

"She will, I am sure, be very good and dear to you," Matthew announced rather pompously. He wished the children would not stare so at him. "And what has my little Pen to say?" He held out his hand to her.

Pen put hers into it. "Does Becky know?" she asked.

"Of course."

"She never told us."

"That was because I wished to tell you myself."

"Will she live here?"

"Not altogether at first, perhaps, because you

Allegra

see, she is acting in my play . . . but afterwards . . .”

“She doesn’t look like anybody’s mother,” Polly repeated obstinately. “Does she *know* she’s got to be it?”

“Well, of course,” Matthew laughed. “If she’s taken me, she knows she has to take you as well, you young ragamuffins.”

“Will she *interfere* with us?” Polly asked. “Choose our hats and that?”

“You must ask her. I don’t know about these things.”

“What does Becky say?”

“My dear little girls,” Matthew said, and he wiped his forehead, “this is not a matter in which anyone has anything to say except Allegra and me.”

“Can we call her Allegra?”

“That, also, you must ask her.”

“When’s she coming?” asked Pen.

“As soon as ever I can persuade her to come. You must do your best that way, too, if you really love your Daddy.”

“I do love you,” cried Pen, and put her arms round his neck. “If you want her so much, you shall have her at once. I’ll go and fetch her now.” And Pen raced from the room.

Polly looked thoughtful. “Do you think,” she said after a pause, “that when she’s our new mother she’ll let me wear caps like the one she had on this morning? I’d like to awfully. Only I shouldn’t wear it in bed; I’d let *everybody* see me in it.”

Allegra

"Polly," said Matthew, and his face was red and earnest, "be very good to her, or you might frighten her away."

"I'll be very kind to her," Polly said indulgently. "I'll try on all her hats and things, and be quite friendly. Do you think Mr. Staniland is coming out this afternoon? I hope so, for he's right in the middle of a lovely story, and he promised to finish it next time he came. Daddy, I *wish* I had a long pigtail like . . . Allegra!"

CHAPTER XXV

ALLEGRA had been engaged a fortnight, and she had not once seen Paul. She had never yet found time to ask him to come and see her. He had not come unasked, and she was beginning to feel uncomfortably certain that he never would come unasked.

Lately her days had been extremely full, and, she confessed to herself, exhausting. She found that Matthew expected her to give him practically all her time except when she was actually in the theatre. That she must always be ready to go with him whithersoever he wanted to go; to meet his many friends and "be nice to them"; to be photographed with him in any circumstances when it pleased him to be photographed—and it did please him much oftener than it pleased Allegra.

In fact, from the night she had accepted him, though she could never remember clearly how it came about, she had lived in a whirl, with never a moment for reflection.

He talked to her incessantly about himself, his past work, the work he was going to do, his plans for the future, and the stimulus and strength her constant companionship would be to him.

Hitherto Allegra had been, perhaps, rather given to talking about herself and *her* work: but

Allegra

since she became Matthew's "sweet star of destiny," as he constantly called her, she never had a look in. It was bewildering, it was rather chastening, above all it was very fatiguing.

As she sat in her little mauve sitting-room that Friday morning, just fourteen days after her engagement, she was feeling rather guilty at the relief she experienced in that she would not see Matthew again for a whole week.

He had started North yesterday on a lecturing tour, when he would discourse upon "Modern Fiction: Its Strength and Its Weakness" in the chapel halls and literary institutes of various large towns in Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Matthew had been most anxious that Allegra should go out to Wellclose for the week-end "to rest in the good air," even though he wasn't there, and wanted to send the car in for her. But Allegra had been almost obstinate in her refusal to do anything of the kind. She wanted to stay quietly in London; besides, her friend, Miss Rendal, was coming up for the week-end to stay with her. She had managed to get a room for her in the house. She would come to the theatre on Saturday, and they would spend Sunday and Monday together.

"It's just as well you are going away, my dear," Allegra had told him. "You wouldn't care for Rosa——"

"Any friend of yours," he protested.

"No, you wouldn't; I'm perfectly sure. She's not your sort at all. You wouldn't understand her and she wouldn't understand you."

Allegra

"Am I so difficult to understand?"

"Not a bit. But there are some people who won't mix. One can't tell why exactly, but they won't. Besides, I'm selfish. I want Rosa all to myself."

"Funny, firm little thing!" Matthew said, kissing her. "I expect the truth is you're afraid I should be too much attracted by this Miss Rendal."

"That, of course, is quite possible," Allegra said coldly.

Matthew gave his moustache a little upward twist and smiled. He knew women.

There were lovely long-stemmed roses in a bowl on Allegra's table. Matthew had given a standing order to a florist in Baker Street to send her flowers every other day. Beautiful embroidered handkerchiefs and long *suede* gloves that Matthew had sent her were in her dressing-table drawer. Chocolates in lovely big boxes tied with wide ribbon had become almost an everyday occurrence, and she knew that he was quite certain to bring her some expensive present when he returned from his tour.

She sat on the sofa absently twisting the big diamonds on her finger, for she was thinking hard and steadily.

It was all very complicated and difficult.

She recalled very vividly a conversation she had had with Rebecca Starr when she spent Sunday at Wellclose at the beginning of that week. A conversation that had filled her with consternation at the time; for she gathered, from what

Allegra

Rebecca said, that a great deal more was expected from her than she had ever conceived possible.

Matthew had gone after lunch to write some letters. The little girls were at church with their maid. Other visitors had not come yet, and Allegra was sitting alone on the verandah, in a long deck-chair, rather sleepily enjoying the serene and prosperous Surrey landscape. Presently Rebecca joined her and sat down bolt upright on a straight-backed basket-chair.

"You must be sure, Miss Burford, to ask me anything you want to know about the management of the house, and make any suggestions that occur to you: and I'll try to carry them out till you are here yourself."

Allegra raised her sleepy eyes to Becky's non-committal face and said lazily: "But I've no suggestions to make. How should I have, when you do it all so beautifully?"

"Everybody," Becky answered, quite unmoved by the compliment, "has ways of their own, and quite right, too. When you're mistress here you'll run things your own way, of course. Matthew's not an interfering man. So long as things are clear and shipshape and there's no muddle about money, he's quite easy to do with. Are you good at accounts?"

Allegra opened her eyes very wide indeed: "I really don't know. . . . I've never had to keep any except my own very small ones. I don't get into debt, or a muddle about my own. . . ."

"There's a good deal to manage here," Becky said briskly, "what with the farm and the gar-

Allegra

dens and the house and the children's education. Perhaps you'd like me to explain my system to you?"

Allegra, by this time, looked alarmed. "But why?" she asked. "You see, I shan't be here except on Sundays. How could I possibly see to all these things? Matthew would never expect it of me. Are you going to be married, Miss Starr, that you talk like this?"

Becky laughed. "No, not that I know of, but I certainly should expect you to want to manage your husband's house in your own way; and I have always told Matthew that I am only here till he marries again."

"If Matthew wanted that sort of managing wife, he would never have chosen me, Miss Starr. He promised me the night he proposed that nothing, *nothing*, should interfere with my profession. . . . It mustn't, it can't. Oh, please don't talk of going away. You'll never find me want to interfere in anything. Have you taken a dislike to me that you want to go away?"

Allegra clasped her hands and sat forward in her chair, deeply concerned; very absurd, Becky thought, but rather lovable in her earnestness and simplicity.

"If you'll excuse my saying so, Miss Burford, I don't think you've quite faced the situation. No one can take on a husband, least of all a husband like Matthew, as a sort of occupation for one's spare time. There's the children, too, to consider; and, what's more, *your* possible children to consider as well."

Allegra

Allegra lay back in her chair again, murmuring faintly: "But Matthew promised."

"They're ready enough to promise anything when they're in love," Becky said bluntly; "but even if you go on acting for some months after you're married, a time will come probably when you'll need to give it oop, and be glad to give it oop. You can't have it both ways, you know. It's no business of mine, but you're young, and I don't want poor Matthew to go through it all again."

"Go through all what again?"

"Why, a wife who can't seem to see to anything herself, and lets things go anyhow, and the servants playing hanky-panky with ivverything. That was what happened with poor Ada . . . but she had bad health. Now you . . . you don't *look* delicate, Miss Burford."

"Do you think," Allegra asked earnestly, "that I'd be doing wrong to marry Matthew if you stay and look after everything?"

"That all depends on what Matthew thinks. Don't you go and complain to him . . ."

"I don't know what you mean," Allegra interrupted indignantly. "What have I to complain about?"

"Well, don't say anything to Matthew about what I've said to you . . . yet. Think it over well while he's away . . . but remember this: Whether I stay or whether I go, Matthew's not the man to be contented with a dummy sort of wife . . . and why should he be?"

Becky rose and stood looking down with rather

Allegra

scornful amusement in her black eyes at the graceful figure in the chair.

"I will remember," Allegra said, very low.

And she did remember. Every word that Becky had said came back to her now, and she bowed her head to the stern common-sense of it.

"You can't have it both ways."

What did that mean exactly? Did it mean that even the most gifted young actress couldn't accept all the pleasant things a rich and adoring husband could give her, unless she was prepared to give in return a great deal more than Allegra saw herself giving at that moment?

"Yet it seemed to answer all right with Winifred Weir. Only, she's much more *experienced* than I am," Allegra pleaded to her invisible mentor. "She'd had two husbands before this one."

Matthew had promised to take a flat for her in town. In fact, he wanted to take it at once, for he greatly disliked her present rooms.

"It's such a bad address," he grumbled. "No one will believe you are really successful if you live in such a hole."

"I can't see what my address has to do with anybody but me," Allegra said huffily. "I shouldn't *act* better if I lived in Carlton House Terrace."

"Perhaps not," answered the shrewd Matthew, "but people would think you did."

"I'll live where you like when we're married, but I like my little attic, and I've taken it for another three months."

Allegra

"My dear child! We'll be married long before that."

"You mustn't hustle me, Matthew," Allegra pleaded. "I *must* get used to you first."

Matthew laughed: "Well, I'll give you every opportunity. You really are the quaintest little soul."

The quaintest little soul gave her ring another twist and sighed deeply.

It *was* all so complicated and difficult.

"You're not looking particularly well, Allegra," Miss Rendal said, late on Saturday night, as they sat by the open window in Allegra's bedroom. "From all you tell me, you've been doing far too much in the restaurant way. You'll spoil your complexion *and* your digestion if you get into that habit."

"You don't think I'm acting badly, do you?" Allegra asked anxiously.

"No. You're as good as you can be in that part, and it suits you down to the ground. But, off, you look far more fagged than you did at Westingley when you had twice the work. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Were you surprised when you heard of my engagement?"

"I'm never surprised at engagements, theatrical or matrimonial. They're both a gamble. But I'd like to see this man of yours. Are you horribly in love?"

"Rosa"—Allegra spoke very low—"it's rather awful, but I don't know."

Allegra

"Don't know!" Rosa repeated incredulously. "You must know. You're in love or you aren't: there's no middle way except in flirtation. I grant you that is safe and sometimes quite amusing."

"You said 'horribly in love.'"

"Well, what if I did? If you're going to marry the man 'shortly,' as all the papers say, you *ought* to be horribly in love, if you're not."

"I'm so tired, Rosa, I don't know what I feel. Let's go to bed and we'll talk about everything to-morrow."

"What about that nice boy who came to see us at Westingley? . . . I'll brush your hair for you—that'll rest you . . . Is he in town?"

"I believe so. . . . I haven't seen him lately. . . . I don't seem to have had a minute . . ."

"He did you proud in that part. I'd keep an eye on him if I were you. He'll be writing plays on his own presently, and if he could suit you again as he has in this . . . why, you'll simply romp to the very top of the hill."

"After all, he got the character out of Matthew's book. He *mightn't* be a bit of good by himself."

"H'm!" Rosa grunted, brushing hard. "Have you got the book? I'd like to have a look at it."

"Not yet. Matthew's having them all bound specially for me, and they haven't come yet."

"Well, when they do come, I should lose no time in reading them if I were you. You can't really know anything about the man you're going to marry till you've read his books. Start with

Allegra

the one that's been dramatised, and then go on to the others."

"I can see," Allegra said plaintively, "that you think it's funny of me not to have read Matthew's books already."

"I do think it's rum," Rosa said, brushing hard, "and I should think the poor man must feel very hurt."

"Oh, Rosa, do you really think so? Poor Matthew! How horrid of me! But you've no idea how rushed I've been."

"You seem, from what you said in your letters, to have found time to read Mr. Staniland's work."

"He read it to me, mostly."

"Good-night, dear goose," Rosa said gently, kissed her, and left her.

Rosa Rendal went back to Westingley on Monday morning, and Allegra spent a contemplative Tuesday in mending her clothes and attending to her neglected correspondence.

Now it was Wednesday evening; and Amelia, the little servant, had just brought up dinner at six sharp, so as to allow plenty of time for Allegra to get to the theatre.

Generally, Amelia set the tray down with a bang and fled from the room, so pressed was she. But to-night she lingered.

"I should like to know, miss," she said, with an ingratiating smile, "which of Mr. M'ythorne's books is *your* favourite. 'E writes something lovely. I've read ever so many of 'em, but I can never myke up me mind which I'm fondest of."

Allegra

"Do you read many novels, Amelia?" Allegra asked, with a cowardly desire to stave off the seemingly inevitable confession that she had read none of Matthew's books.

"As many as I can get, miss; 'specially Mr. M'ythorne's. Which is your favourite, miss?"

"I'm really not sure," Allegra faltered disingenuously. "Do you happen to have any of them?"

"I've got two down in me bedroom this very minute, miss. *A Woman's Heart* and *The Fatal Secret*. I always read 'm in bed at night when I can nick a bit of candle, an' Mrs. Wingfield she can't see a light under my door, for I lays a shawl against it. I've bought a pound of candles out of my own money before now. You know, miss, I sometimes think Doris, in *A Woman's Heart*'s a bit like you."

"I've not read either of the two you mention," Allegra said. "I wonder if you would lend one of them to me—*A Woman's Heart*. Mr. Maythorne is having them bound especially for me, and they haven't come yet."

"You can have it, miss, and welcome. I'll bring it up along with your puddin'."

"It's very kind of you. And, Amelia, do take care not to set yourself on fire reading in bed with a candle. Don't you think it's very dangerous?"

"It is rather," Amelia allowed cheerfully; "but I don't get any other chance. If Mrs. Wingfield was to see me with a book in me 'and in the kitching, she'd carry on something dreadful. An'

Allegra

once you're in bed and readin'—you gets right away from it all."

A Woman's Heart was duly served up with the pudding, a rather dirty paper copy at fourpence-halfpenny, with a highly-coloured device upon the cover.

Allegra lifted it gingerly, and on the back she read the names of many others by Matthew, in the same edition, that had run into hundreds of thousands.

Happy Matthew, to be able to give pleasure to such numbers of people! What did it matter if the poor little book looked horrid, when it opened up a whole world of romantic beauty to poor Amelia and her like? Allegra laid the *Woman's Heart* aside with a tender hand. To-morrow she would read it with the tense concentration that she brought to bear on everything she read. Then, when Matthew came back, she would be able to talk it over with him as she had talked over those Garsetshire sketches with Paul.

What a long time it was since she had seen Paul!

She really must ask him to tea one day. They had been such friends, and surely there was no reason why they should not go on being friends? Matthew liked him, too.

Poor Matthew! Perhaps she had been rather neglectful about his books. Never mind; she would read *A Woman's Heart* very carefully, and astonish him by her knowledge of it when he got back.

Hadn't Paul said something about his sister

Allegra

coming up to ride at the Horse Show? If Lucy was in London, Paul must certainly bring her. Lucy was a dear.

Before she went to the theatre she wrote a note to Paul, asking him to come and have tea with her on Friday, and to be sure and bring Lucy if she was in town.

Directly she had finished her breakfast next morning she sat down to read *A Woman's Heart*. It was rather a grubby copy, but that very fact was just one more proof of Matthew's far-reaching popularity. She loved to think he had given such real pleasure to poor Amelia.

For half an hour she read steadily, slowly, and carefully. There was no sound in the little room save the turning of the pages.

Presently she began to fidget. The pages were turned more quickly, and Allegra's delicately-marked eyebrows were drawn together in a puzzled frown.

During those six years at Oxford she had read greedily everything that came in her way, and much of it was not at all the usual reading of girls of her age. She had had free access to Mr. Wycherley's library, and he himself had been at some pains to cultivate "the love of lovely words" that was already strong in her. Allegra knew something about style, and she had eagerly discussed too many Greek dramas with her old friend not to have some idea of construction too. Slipshod English in a book she could not away with. Plays were a different matter. Some of them seemed to depend but little on their "lines";

Allegra

but she liked, herself, to have telling lines to speak.

At the end of forty minutes she laid *A Woman's Heart* upon the table with something very nearly resembling a slap. She turned to the front page and found, "First published 1903"—followed by the dates of a dozen fresh editions.

That accounted for it. It was ten years old: one of Matthew's earlier books.

It certainly was worse than anything she had ever read before. She had already discovered that Matthew knew nothing of the classics. He had gone into journalism at sixteen, so how could he, poor dear?

But this!

Doggedly she took it up again; and this time she skipped. Pages were turned rapidly, the brown eyes travelled impetuously across them as though hastening to some resting-place; but, finding none, spurred on.

Again she laid the crumpled paper book down on the table, sniffed distastefully at her hands, and went to wash them.

It was clear that she was disquieted. She had the look of one who has received bad news. Bad news that was something of a shock.

Still, she told herself, it was one of his earlier books, and though she disliked it, though she detested it, there might be many others she would love.

She would not attempt to discuss *A Woman's Heart* with Matthew. She would not even tell him she had read it. There was an Oxford Don

Allegra

in the story, and Matthew had got hopelessly entangled in his attempt to describe both him and his environment. To Allegra, who knew Oxford, the mistakes were both ludicrous and annoying.

"He might surely have *asked* somebody," she reflected ruefully, "if he was as vague as this himself."

On her return from a shopping expedition she tried *A Woman's Heart* again, almost praying that she might feel more interested, but still the unfortunate story almost revolted her.

She spent the afternoon with friends, but finding she had half an hour before dinner, she tried it again—and was bored literally to tears.

She did so want to be absolutely loyal to Matthew, and it was dreadful to feel like this about his book.

Rebecca Starr and Rosa Rendal had each in her different way, and for very different reasons, aroused the never-long-dormant conscience in Allegra.

She honestly desired to understand Matthew and to be in perfect sympathy with him. To be to him the Inspiration he was so fond of calling her.

He had talked so much about his "Art," too.

Allegra blushed. She had done that a good deal herself.

Was it possible that some people might feel about her acting as she felt about Matthew's book?

Allegra

No, they couldn't. She was certain they couldn't.

All the same, she went to the theatre in a most uncomfortable frame of mind.

When she got back to her rooms she found a wooden packing-case, and on the label was the name of Matthew's publishers.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FEW hot days had brought the roses out in their hundreds, and the Squire and his wife were dead-heading them after lunch.

"I'm worried about Paul," Mrs. Staniland said. "Do you think he is very hard hit by that girl's engagement?"

"If he is, I don't suppose you are," the Squire said, smiling at her. "Eh, my dear?"

"I don't know, Henry. Though I certainly don't want her myself—yet . . . I can't bear Paul to be miserable, and I'm afraid he's very miserable: and you can't explain it away now by saying it's anxiety about the play."

"He's not the first young man who's been crossed in love, and got over it, and lived to be thankful he *was* crossed. He must just go through with his disappointment. Confess now, you'd be much more distressed if he was going to marry the girl next week."

"He's so pathetic when he's miserable," Mrs. Staniland lamented. "I feel as if I couldn't bear it. I suppose it's because he is generally so radiant and enjoys things so, that to see him like this . . . the contrast seems unendurable."

"Bless you, it's like measles. Rash out all over him just now, but presently the fever will abate and he'll sit up and take notice and see

Allegra

there's a good deal that's jolly in life, even if that Miss Thingumbob is going to marry Matthew Maythorne. Now, *I* think she's an exceedingly sensible girl, and I wish her joy."

"I can't imagine how any girl could look at Mr. Maythorne if she had the chance of Paul. Why, he isn't even a gentleman. Anyone can see that."

"Mothers are funny creatures," the Squire exclaimed. "Here were you fretting yourself to fiddlestrings at the end of February because you were so terrified this young actress might get hold of Paul and marry him, and now, in June, you're indignant with her because she shows in the plainest way possible that she has no desire to do anything of the sort. I ask you, mother, is it fair? Is it reasonable?"

"Mothers don't reason, they feel. . . . Besides, she isn't married yet," Mrs. Staniland said darkly. "And he's going up to town with Lucy to-morrow. I wish he was staying on safely down here."

"He's been down here over a fortnight, mooning about with a long face and his hands in his pockets. It'll do him good to bestir himself. He's useful with horses, and Greenwood can't manage two alone going across London. That mare of Lucy's is a fidget, and it will be the deuce's own delight getting her in and out of the box. I don't believe it could be done if Paul wasn't there to talk to her. I won't have Lucy fussing round a horse-box herself, and that's what would happen if neither Paul nor I were there. Let him look

Allegra

after his sister till I go up. I wish you'd change your mind and come with me."

"Don't tempt me, Henry. Besides, I should be nervous about Lucy. I'd far rather not go to the Horse Show the day she rides."

"Why? You weren't a bit nervous when you showed a hunter there yourself. It isn't as if she was going to take Columbine over the jumps."

"If I were showing her myself I shouldn't be nervous now—but one's daughter's a different thing. No, better away."

"You must please yourself, mother; but it's a new phase for you to be worrying over the children like this."

"I expect," Mrs. Staniland said with a queer little breathless catch in her voice, "it's because I'm getting old."

The squire looked carefully round the garden to see that no one was in sight. Then he kissed her and she went into the house.

Paul had spent a quite dreadful Sunday in Elm Tree Road after he heard of Allegra's engagement.

He thought he wouldn't have minded so much if it had been somebody else—but Maythorne!

It seemed incredible it should be Maythorne.

Where was Allegra's unerring, discriminating taste? She would find him out. He would disappoint her. She would be wretched; and the wretchedness of Allegra was a thing Paul simply couldn't tolerate.

She was deceived in Maythorne, and Paul had helped to deceive her.

Allegra

That was the reflection that tore his fortitude to tatters.

In some ways Paul was rather like his father. He didn't judge people. He was easy-going and content to take them as they were, never expecting that they should be after some approved pattern. Yet deep in his heart there existed the very English need to believe in the inherent honesty of a man before he could quite like him. "Honour" was a grandiloquent word to use. It was a bore to talk about it. People didn't talk about it. Only, if it so happened that you came across a man whose conduct violated that seldom-mentioned code, you just left him outside the ring-fence enclosing those who subscribed to what it was so tiresome to define. You might, yourself, go outside and mix pleasantly enough with these complicated people on certain terms. But you never brought them inside the ring-fence.

It wasn't done.

Paul had a firm belief in the peculiar value of his father's judgment in a question of right and wrong, and he was so bewildered and distressed by his own position in this most complicated affair, that he went home on Monday and took Simon with him.

Yet when he got there he never said a word about his troubles to anybody, except to make chillingly brief answers to the excited comments of his mother and Lucy when they saw the announcement of Allegra's engagement in the papers.

His father knew what he wanted, and gave him every possible opportunity of freeing his mind;

Allegra

but Paul, when he did talk, which was seldom for so loquacious a person, chose any other topic than the one that filled all his mind.

At the end of a fortnight the squire began to feel rather irritated.

Had the boy come home merely to moon about with a long face?

It was like Paul to come rushing back if he was in any sort of scrape: but it was not like Paul, not in the least like Paul, to keep the cause of his manifest unhappiness so absolutely to himself.

The Squire had never had to ask for the confidence of his children. Hitherto it had been given freely: and of all the four, Paul, from the time he was a queer, dreamy, delicate little child, had been particularly ready to lay his every difficulty before the silent, patient father he admired above all mortal men. If Paul went back to London, and he was going next day, without having spoken, the Squire felt that in some way he must have failed. Yet he made no overtures of any sort. "Least said, soonest mended," had ever been a favourite motto of his.

Lucy guessed what was the matter with Paul, and, like her father, she asked him no questions. Yet Lucy's face when Maythorne's name was mentioned lost its soft contours and became very stern indeed. She held decided views about Maythorne, and for reasons that, as yet, she had confided to nobody.

"I wish to goodness Flint had never meddled with the boy," thought the Squire as he stooped to blow smoke into a *Baronne Prevost* that was

Allegra

blighted, and as he lifted his head he saw the object of his thoughts coming towards him across the lawn, surrounded, as usual, by all the dogs.

Paul did not make an impressive appearance. His shoulders were hunched nearly to his ears, his Norfolk jacket was almost ragged, and his hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his most ancient grey flannel trousers. Gloom was on his brow and his slippers were down at the heel.

As the Squire watched his younger son's slow progress towards him, he felt like putting him in a Bank that minute.

It was ridiculous and unmanly to wear the willow so obviously.

And yet when, catching sight of his father, the young man hurried his steps, and the gloomy face suddenly lit up with the eager, confident smile few people could resist, the Squire's heart melted.

"You look busy," he observed dryly.

"I know you think I'm an ass, Dad, and you're right. I am. But I'm not just the particular sort of ass you think me."

"The particular sort of ass you are is, perhaps mercifully, hidden from me; but at the risk of appearing unsympathetic, I'd like to suggest you should pull yourself together. Don't you think it's about time?"

"You mean I've fasted and wept enough?"

"I don't know about the fasting, but I think it's time you drew up the blinds and let in some light and air."

"God knows I'd be thankful for any light. Look here, Dad; leave those roses and come and

Allegra

sit in the arbour. I'm worried to death—not, as you think, because the girl I care for is going to marry another chap; but because she thinks he's something he isn't, and I've helped her to think so."

The dogs were sad. They were not allowed in the kitchen-garden. Paul thrust his arm through his father's, and together they sought a little house carved out of a great box-tree, right at the far end of the middle path.

In it were a round table and a wooden bench; directly behind it a high wall. It would hold half a dozen children, and three grown people had been known to squeeze on to the seat. It was far from everything and everybody, and the family always chose it for confidential conclaves. They could never be taken in the rear when they were in that box arbour.

Once there, Paul made up for his taciturnity during the past week. The squire had finished one cigar and started upon another before his son paused in his recital, and even then he seemed in no hurry to say anything, but smoked on in silence till Paul exclaimed impatiently: "Well?"

"I don't think there's anything to be done," the Squire said slowly.

"And when she finds out, as she must find out, won't she think me just as bad as he is?"

"Probably."

"But I can't bear that."

"You'll have to bear it. You, of all people in the world, can't enlighten the lady. If, as you say, she's an educated girl with taste and some

Allegra

knowledge of literature, she couldn't read two pages of any book by that chap—if what you say about his work isn't frightfully biassed—without seeing exactly what has happened. But mind you, I think you probably exaggerate the importance of good writing or bad in her eyes."

"It isn't a question of good writing or bad; it's not having written something at all, and pretending you have."

"You writing people always seem to me to make a mighty pother about what, after all, is quite unimportant to the rest of the world—it's all very much a matter of individual taste. You think this Maythorne man writes illiterate trash. Maythorne's admirers would probably think you write incomprehensible twaddle. A large proportion of the inhabitants of this island probably will never give a moment's thought to either of you—that is, even supposing you were as well known in your line as he is in his. And as to this girl, a clever girl and a nice girl I'm quite ready to admit—I admired her very much in that piece—what she wants, probably, is a good husband who'll give her pretty frocks and be kind and make things easy, and when she's tired of acting make a nice home for her."

"I don't believe she'll ever be tired of acting."

"Then, my dear boy, you're well out of it. I haven't a word to say against the lady, but I think it would be a most uncomfortable profession for a wife. Imagine me, if your mother always insisted on dinner at some unearthly hour because she had to prance off to the theatre every

Allegra

night, whatever the weather! It would be a dog's life."

Paul laughed. "Suppose, though, father, when you and mother were both young, you'd found you couldn't have her *without* the theatre? Would you have let her go?"

"Thank God I never had to face such an alternative," the Squire ejaculated piously. "And from all I can make out, you aren't faced with it either, as the lady has chosen the other man. That being the case, I think it's time you bowed to her decision and ceased looking like a cross between a thunderstorm and a Scotch mist. It's very depressing for the rest of us. Even if your girl *has* chucked you . . ."

"She *hasn't* chucked me. I never asked her . . ." Paul interrupted.

"Well, she's taken the man who did ask her, and there's an end of it. It's no use thinking she's going to throw him over just because she mayn't exactly like the style of his books. For one person who cares about style of that sort, there are five hundred, women especially, who care for style of five hundred other sorts, and from what you tell me, he can do things jolly well for her."

"Allegra won't care about that," Paul maintained, "if she thinks he isn't straight. She's one of the most honest people I've ever met."

The Squire sighed; then, more hopefully: "Perhaps she won't find him out."

"It will surprise me if she *hasn't* found him out already."

Allegra

"Anyway, it's none of our business. I must go and see Wakefield about those new cow-houses; and I'd ask you to come with me, if you can summon sufficient fortitude to put on a pair of boots."

"I'll put on some boots . . . but look here, if she sends for me and asks me to tell her the truth about the play—what am I to do?"

"If she asks you to tell her the truth it will be because she knows the truth already."

"But if she blames me?"

The Squire spread out his hands with a hopeless gesture: "Surely you've not lived twenty-five years in the world without being able to take blame patiently."

"But if she thinks I've been unkind and disloyal to her?"

"My dear Paul, I'm not a clairvoyant. I can't foresee what the lady may do or think or say to you. But I should say that the less you see of her at all for the present, the better it will be for you and for her and for Maythorne."

"I don't care a tinker's curse about Maythorne."

"Now I," said the Squire, "feel rather sorry for Maythorne—if she's the kind of girl you describe. I see breakers ahead for Maythorne: very dirty weather indeed. . . . Hurry up and get your boots."

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH Amelia's help Allegra opened the packing-case directly after breakfast. On the top was a card from the publisher: "Ten more volumes to follow."

There were ten in the case, bound in claret-coloured calf with tooled edges beautiful to behold. They were carefully packed with much paper and thick cardboard.

Together, Allegra and the vociferously admiring Amelia lifted the books from their wrappings and set them on one of the empty shelves of the mauve lady's bookcase, where they sat looking solemn and splendid.

Then Amelia carried away the box and the wrappings, and left Allegra alone with her books.

She scanned the gold-lettered titles on the backs. Yes: *A Woman's Heart* was there, but she felt no desire to read *A Woman's Heart* again, even in this beautiful edition.

Riches are Sorrow was there, too.

Ah! that was the test book.

Surely here she would find the Matthew she was looking for. The Matthew of the play. The Matthew with the humorous, whimsical human touch that was delighting London.

Here she would discover the "germ," as Matthew called it, that had quickened into life the

Allegra

group of fantastic people with whom she lived for so large a portion of each week.

Yet she hesitated before she took it from the shelf.

Suppose she didn't like the novel as much as she liked the play? That was quite possible, for she nearly always preferred plays to novels.

She crossed to the window and looked out at the wall that was so unpleasantly close to it.

It was a grimy wall, blank and uninteresting. Yet Allegra stared at it with eyes that held in them a queer, frightened look.

For full five minutes she stood staring at that wall.

Then she went back to the bookcase, took out *Riches are Sorrow*, and sat down on the mauve sofa to read it.

The print was good, the paper was good, and the binding had a delicious smell. She read slowly and carefully; the room was very still; there was nothing to distract her.

By-and-by she laid the book on the sofa beside her, and, leaning forward, put her elbows on her knees and bent her head down on her two hands, as though she were striving to recall something. She sat bowed forward like that for several minutes. When she lifted her head, her face was grave and set.

She went back to *Riches are Sorrow* and read for another hour.

Then she put it back on the shelf, dressed carefully in her out-door things, went downstairs and out of the house.

Allegra

In the Marylebone Road she took a taxi and drove to Miss Duval's flat in Basil Street, asked for Miss Duval, was told she was not up yet, and sent in her name. She had been in the flat several times before, but to-day it struck her afresh as so pretty and well-ordered: and she would have a nicer flat than this when . . . a nicer flat than this if . . .

The neat maid came back to say that Miss Duval would see her.

Shown into the bedroom, Allegra shut the door, went forward and stood, tall and straight, looking down at Miss Duval, and thinking how extraordinarily handsome she was in bed, with no make-up at all and her splendid light-brown hair billowing over the pillows. "Large, lovely arms and a neck like a tower," had Miss Duval. It was a warm morning, and her filmy nightdress seemed to display rather than conceal her ample charms.

"Hullo!" she said, "you look very solemn. What's the matter? Have you quarrelled with Claude? Has Vyne been tiresome, or what? What is it? Do sit down."

"I've come," Allegra said with grave directness, "to ask you to tell me the truth; and I believe you will, because you don't like me."

"How do you know I don't like you?" Miss Duval asked. "I'm not sure now that I don't. I didn't a couple of months ago, I confess."

"Why?"

"When you're my age, and a little upstart of an understudy romps in with a secondary part

Allegra

written specially for her by a clever youngster who's in love with her, and lifts it out of its proper place in the piece, and becomes, herself, unduly prominent, *you* won't like it, either. But I'm resigned now. There's no getting rid of you till you're married, I can see that. . . . Well, out with it: what do you want the truth about?"

"Miss Duval, did Matthew Maythorne or did he not write *Little St. Germaine's?*"

"Haven't you asked him? You've had plenty of opportunities, surely. How should I know?"

"You *do* know," Allegra exclaimed passionately. "Everybody seems to have known but me that he didn't write a line of it, and, what's more, that he didn't even suggest a single situation in it."

"Well! and what if he didn't? He paid someone else very handsomely to do it for him—and it's done every day. Surely you're not going to fuss about young Staniland's work on the play at this time of day. He's done *uncommonly* well out of it. Has *he* been grumbling?"

"Grumbling! No. He's in the conspiracy with all the rest of you to make me believe that Matthew wrote the play."

"My good girl," Miss Duval exclaimed wearily, "do sit down; you're getting on my nerves standing there like a hop-pole. What does it matter who actually wrote the play? It just happened to take Claude's fancy at the right moment, and has been a success. Lots of infinitely better plays have never even got read by the right people, and never will. What are you making such a hulla-

Allegra

baloo about?—standing there like an accusing angel. *Sit down, for goodness' sake!* Anyway, *I didn't write the play.*"

Allegra sat down. "You know very well," she said, "that you despise Matthew for taking the credit of another man's work. Hundreds of little things I never noticed at the time—or, if I did notice, didn't understand—come back to me now."

"If you hadn't been so stuck-up and stand-off, and hadn't always rushed off directly after rehearsals the minute you'd finished your part, taking no earthly interest in the rest of us—you'd have heard the whole thing discussed, and then you'd have been in the know like everybody else. But now that you *do* know, what anyone with the faintest spark of intelligence could have guessed at the very beginning, I can't see what you're so solemn about. What *does* it matter?"

"It matters infinitely much to me. It alters everything, because it shows me that the man I am engaged to . . . Miss Duval, be honest. What would you feel if you discovered such a thing about somebody you thought you cared for?"

"Ah," said Miss Duval, with the long open vowel that was so telling on the stage, "there you give yourself away. You only *think* you care for Matthew Maythorne. That's what I've said all along. You are just as dishonest in your way as he is in his. Yes! you may well blush. I confess I haven't much patience with women of your sort . . . very cautious and straight and good no

Allegra

doubt—but with neither the courage nor the temperament to care in any great sort of way."

"How can one tell if it's a great sort of way or not?" asked Allegra.

"If you really loved him—as I count loving—I don't say it lasts, mind, but it's a big thing while it's got you—you wouldn't care a discarded playbill *what he'd done.*"

"I certainly don't care like that," Allegra said.

Miss Duval sat up from her pillows, lifted a beautiful bare arm and pointed an accusing finger at Allegra: "Then you've deceived that man far worse than he has deceived the public. At first I thought you'd hooked him simply because he was rich and successful and could do you a lot of good in your profession (which is all you care about, and he's got a genius for advertisement); but I'm not so sure of that now. I thought you'd marry Maythorne and keep the youngster hanging on to write his plays—always with a fat part for you, because he's in love with you."

"But that would be infamous!" Allegra exclaimed, aghast.

"Well, that's how it appeared to a good many people, I can tell you."

"I can't marry Matthew after this . . . if it had been anything else . . ."

"Pooh! we always say that when we're tired of a man, whether it's another woman, or a shady money transaction, or he's gone and got drunk in a conspicuous way . . . 'if it had been anything else'—that's when we're tired of a man."

"And if we're not tired of him?"

Allegra

"If a woman really cares—a woman, mind you, not a respectable fish—the very fact that a man has got himself into some awful scrape that makes other people look askance at him only makes her stick to him the closer."

"I may be a 'respectable fish,'" Allegra retorted with some spirit, "but even fishes have their own way of loving, and some of them have, perhaps, elementary notions of honour, and what is straight and what is not, as well. Would *you* marry Matthew, knowing this?"

"Me marry Maythorne!" Miss Duval exclaimed. "I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man left in a depopulated world. He'd bore me to death in twenty-four hours, he's so bourgeois."

"And yet you think I ought to stick to him, feeling as I do?"

"I don't say that. But," Miss Duval lifted her arm again and pointed at Allegra, "you accepted him. You led him to believe you cared for him, and perhaps he, poor devil, doesn't realise you're one of those cold-blooded intellectuals who don't know what real caring means. Now, people have talked about me. They've had reason to talk about me—I've given them plenty—but I can truly say this: that, whatever I've done, I've done because I cared—at the time—and for no other reason. Now, you care for nobody but yourself. You're always pleasant and well-mannered. You never quarrel or try to grab things or talk scandal. But do you ever—have you ever, since I knew you, done one kind

Allegra

or generous thing for anybody else that cost you anything? Have you?"

"No," Allegra said, looking straight into Miss Duval's eyes, "for there never has been anything that I could do."

"There never will be, as long as you're so wrapped up in yourself. No one would think of going to *you* in any trouble."

"Yet I think I'd try to help if they did," Allegra said, quite humbly.

"Well, don't make it any harder than you need for that poor chap Maythorne, now. I don't say you should marry him—I thought it a mistake from the very first—but remember, when you chuck him, that he thinks you care for him. You're a clever actress and can play any *ingénue* part when you set your mind to it. Just for once, put yourself in the place of the discarded one. Suppose somebody you really liked made you think he cared—and then, suddenly, showed you that he didn't? Suppose that happened to you?"

"It has happened to me," Allegra said, very low.

"Poor little soul!" Miss Duval said, and her voice was kind as it had been taunting a moment before.

She held out her large white hand and Allegra put hers into it.

"I've said a lot that's disagreeable," Miss Duval continued, "but if you think over it, you're so honest you'll see some of it's true. You're abominably clever, and we're all jealous of you, and that's the truth—but clever as you are, you'd

Allegra

even be a better actress if you were a bit more human—you would, really."

Allegra rose, tall and pale, her large eyes full of unshed tears. "It was good of you to see me," she said. "I shan't forget your kindness, nor what you've said. Good-bye."

"Kiss me, you icicle!" Miss Duval cried, sitting up in bed and holding out her arms as Allegra reached the door. "Come back and kiss me."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALLEGRA went blindly into Basil Street. The bright sunshine seemed dazzling after the tempered shade of Miss Duval's bedroom. It made her blink, and the heavy, unshed tears rolled over and down her cheeks.

She wiped them away impatiently, turned into Knightsbridge, and walked up towards St. George's Hospital in a sort of dream.

This, then, was how she appeared to other people. Hard, selfish, unloving, ungiving, calculating, absorbed in herself. And as she appeared, so, she confessed, she was. All except calculating—she wasn't that. But, being what she was, she had contrived to land herself in as painful and unpleasant an impasse as if she had been the most recklessly impulsive person possible.

She was going to be cruel to Matthew. To hurt him dreadfully. To wound him where he would feel most poignantly the agony of the blow. A blow as unexpected as she felt it to be undeserved. All her anger against Matthew had evaporated before the flame of Miss Duval's scorching candour. Not because what he had done seemed to her any less shameful, but because what she had done seemed infinitely more so. Paul, too, had deceived her: but he *did* do things for other people. He had gone to Bitley because the Danceys were in trouble and wanted him. She realised that now.

Allegra

Poor Matthew up there in the North, counting the hours till he could rush back to her and recount his triumphs—and coming back to . . . what?

Again her tears rolled over and fell at the pathos of the happily expectant Matthew. By this time she was in Piccadilly.

Now, a tall, well-dressed, pretty girl crying in Piccadilly at midday on a fine June morning is an unusual spectacle. Moreover, Allegra had the misfortune (it really was a misfortune just then) to cry without making faces. Her tears fell, and she looked the picture of woe; but it was an attractive picture, and people stared at her.

Absorbed in her dismal reflections, she walked on quite unconscious of the attention she was attracting.

An immaculate young man, wearing a monocle he did not require in the least, saw her, dropped his monocle, passed, turned and went after her, and appeared at her elbow, lifted his newly-ironed hat and said: "I say . . . I beg your pardon—but you seem in trouble. Can I do anything?"

Allegra suddenly realised where she was and what she was doing. She came back to the actual with a start.

"Oh! If you would please call me a taxi, I'd be most grateful."

Her one desire now was to hide herself from all these staring people.

He replaced his monocle, waved a slender stick, and as if by magic a taxi appeared.

"I say," he observed again, "suppose you feel

Allegra`

ill or somethin'—you ought not to be alone.
Shall I come with you?"

"Oh no!" Allegra exclaimed in horror. "I've had bad news, that's all. I'm perfectly well—thank you so much. Good-bye." And she darted into the taxi, which by this time had drawn up at the kerb.

"I say, you'd better let me—you know—" and he made no effort to follow her.

"Oh, go away!" Allegra wailed from the farthest corner of the taxi. "How can you be so unkind? Go away!"

The young man stepped back, the monocle fled from his eye. Again he lifted the shiny hat: "Where to?" he asked.

Allegra gave the address, and the taxi vanished into the traffic of Piccadilly.

For quite a minute he stood on the pavement, looking after it. "Now, where the dickens have I seen that girl before?" he wondered.

Allegra felt shaken. It had been a dreadful morning altogether.

When she got back to her rooms she found a letter from Matthew by the second post.

"**MY DARLING GIRL,**" it ran.

"In another twenty-four hours I shall be with you. I give my last lecture to-night. They have been a huge success, both financially and artistically. Packed houses and immense slaughter in the audience. Tears and laughter and applause all the way through. But all the time I've been longing to get back to my own little girl, and I've

Allegra

got something for her to wear round her pretty neck that I know she will like. I hope to finish up everything by midday to-morrow and to be with you by late tea-time. You'll give your Matthew a cup, won't you? Then we'll go out to dinner together, and I'll turn up at the show at night. Oh, how I long to hold you in my arms again, my dearest.

"Some of the books ought to have turned up by now. I wonder if you have had time to look into any of them. They've had their share of praise and popularity—but they're nothing to what I shall write *now*, with you at my side."

"Till to-morrow, then, my own, own dearest,
 "Your adoring
 "MATTHEW."

"You've eat next to nothing, miss," said Amelia as she cleared away Allegra's lunch. "It's to be 'oped Mr. M'ythorne's comin' back soon, else you'll fret yourself to a shadder—that you will."

Allegra had ceased to weep, but she was pale, and she started at every sound as though she had committed a crime and the police were on her track.

She had committed a crime, she felt, and Nemesis was anything but leaden-footed in her case.

But, having once made up her mind that she couldn't marry Matthew, she was determined to end, at once and for ever, that very evening, a situation that had become quite intolerable. She would tell him as gently as she could that she found it impossible to marry him, and she would give him back all his presents there and then.

Allegra

She took off her ring and laid it on the table. She fetched its little leather case and placed the ring within it. Then she added all the other things Matthew had given her; they made quite a large and melancholy pile. After all, she couldn't expect poor Matthew to take away all these things with him. She would make them into a parcel and send them to Wellclose.

It was a hateful thing to have to do. It would be harrowing for poor Matthew to open the parcel and see them all. Perhaps he wouldn't open the parcel at all, but just thrust it away somewhere, and tidy Miss Starr would find it and open it, and hide the things away so that they shouldn't pain him. Perhaps she might even ask Miss Starr to do it.

Oh, it was awful to have to hurt people like this. It would almost be easier to marry him and say nothing. . . . But, no, that was impossible. . . . But to have to tell him, to have to send him away wretched when he came to her joyful and proud . . .

Oh dear! oh dear! oh dear! And Allegra, regardless for once of the fact that she had to play "Mellory" that night and her eyes would be swollen, burst into sobs again.

"Tat-tat; tat-tat; tat-tat," went the Grufanuff knocker with a knock that had been both frequent and familiar three weeks ago.

She gave a stifled scream, it had startled her so much. The door was opened and Paul stood on the threshold.

In an instant his quick eyes had taken in the

Allegra

weeping damsel sitting at the table heaped with a miscellaneous collection of jewellery, gloves, handkerchiefs, scent-bottles, and what price-lists call "elegant trifles" of all sorts and sizes.

Allegra looked at him through her tears and said never a word.

"Shall I go away?" asked Paul. "They told me you were in, so I just came up, but I'm afraid I've come at a bad time."

"Come in," Allegra said huskily. "Come in and look at the misery you've helped to make. Come in and shut the door—lock it."

"Certainly not," Paul said. "Why should I?" and shut it, firmly, looking much astonished. "What on earth is the matter?" he demanded.

"Do you see all these things?" And Allegra spread her hands out over them with a dramatic gesture. "This afternoon I've got to give them all back to poor Matthew."

"But why? Has he quarrelled with you?"

She laughed bitterly: "Poor dear, indeed he hasn't; but I've got to tell him I won't marry him, and it will break his heart."

"You seem," Paul said severely, "a perfect adept at breaking hearts—first mine and now Maythorne's. I wonder if he's as ignorant of what he's done as I was?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Allegra said wearily. "Who broke your heart, and why?"

"God knows why, and you surely can't pretend you don't know *who* broke my heart."

"Are you accusing me?"

Allegra

"Well, you knew very well what I felt, what I feel, worse luck!—and, I suppose, always shall feel for you. . . . But that isn't interesting. What I want to know is what has Maythorne done? What has happened?"

"I have found out everything. EVERYTHING about you both."

Paul passed his hand over his forehead, and began to think that either Allegra had gone mad or he had. He wasn't sure which.

"I don't understand," he said. "Of what does this tremendous everything consist?"

"He has lied and you have lied, and I shall never, never believe in any man again. Only women speak the truth and are honest."

"Miss Burford," Paul said, now thoroughly angry, "no one shall say that I lie, without giving grounds for the assertion. What do you mean?"

He came forward to the table and looked across it at the tear-stained, dear, dear face with the trembling lips and the clear eyes all dimmed and drenched with tears: and his anger died in the tenderness that smothered it.

"You know, you knew all the time that he didn't write that play, *my* play," Allegra said, "that there was nothing at all of him in it; and yet you let me think he did. . . . You let me say things that must have made me seem a perfect idiot. You never gave me the slightest hint. . . . And if that isn't lies—I don't know what is. How are you any better than he is? You sold your work, your precious work—at least it

Allegra

ought to have been precious, if you ever can be sincere, which I begin to doubt—and you connive at his deception, and all for money . . . and I thought you were . . . so different."

Allegra laid her arms on the table on the top of the heap of presents, her head went down on her arms, and there was no sound in the little room save her long-drawn, agitated breathing.

"Why don't you say something?" she said at last, with her face still hidden. "Do you think I like to find out everybody in these deceits?"

"You have contrived to make out so black a case against me," Paul said bitterly, "that it hardly seems worth while trying to explain anything."

"I'd like you to explain—all the same—if you can," the muffled voice replied.

"Has it ever struck you that *you* may have something to do with my accepting the work on Maythorne's beastly book?"

Allegra lifted her head and looked at Paul—and suddenly she smiled at him just as she had smiled in Bitley woods: "You did it for me? You hated doing it, but you did it for me?"

"No. I didn't hate doing it. Once I got going I liked doing it: but it was for you I did it; for you all the time. The money never came into it at all. You really may believe that. I thought it quite likely Maythorne would refuse my work, then I should have returned his money. If you don't believe me, you can ask Flint."

"I do believe you."

Allegra

"You are looking frightfully ill, Allegra. What has happened? Tell me."

"First I found out about the play, when I started to read poor Matthew's . . ."

"Why do you always call him 'poor Matthew'?" Paul interrupted irritably. "He isn't dead, is he?"

"No," she said seriously. "He's coming back to London this evening, though, and he doesn't know I've found out, or anything. Oh, I've had such an awful day. First I started to read *Riches are Sorrow—Look!*" She pointed to the well-filled shelf in the bookcase. "Look at all his poor, dear, dreadful books!"

"Good Lord!" Paul exclaimed.

"And then I went to ask Miss Duval," Allegra continued; "and she made me see how odious I am . . ."

"You're not odious. That's nonsense."

"And then I came away, and I cried in Piccadilly. And a young man spoke to me, and I asked him to get me a taxi, and he wanted to come with me . . ."

"Damn him!" Paul exclaimed viciously.

"Yes, do," Allegra remarked heartily. "I felt like that, only I never swear—and I've been crying ever since, and if I cry any more it will be Miss Weir all over again, and serve me right."

"Look here," said Paul, "you're not going to cry any more. You're taking all this far too seriously. You thought you loved Maythorne, and you find you don't; and it's much better to

Allegra

find out a thing of that sort soon than too late. Of course it's rotten luck for him, but still—it would be worse later on; and worst of all if you found you'd made a mistake after you'd married him."

"I shall never marry now," Allegra said sadly. "The whole thing is too harrowing. And it's nearly all your fault, you know."

"My fault! In what possible way have I anything to do with it? I've never even seen you since you got engaged."

"I should never have got engaged in such a hurry, if you hadn't gone rushing off to Bitley just when you'd promised to go out with me."

She stood up suddenly, and Paul came round the table and stood beside her: "But I explained all that to you. I *had* to go."

Allegra shook her head. "It was that did it." "Allegra!"

"It was. I thought you were only amusing yourself, and I wanted to show you . . ."

"My dear, my dear!" Paul said brokenly, and his arms went round her.

"I've been so wretched," sobbed Allegra.

"I've been in hell," Paul whispered into her hair.

"No, you mustn't. . . . Please. . . . It's awful of us."

"My dear, my dear!" Paul said again.

Deaf to everything; oblivious of everyone except each other; they stood together, breathlessly recapturing that wonderful lost moment of their last meeting. They heard no hasty footsteps on

Allegra

the stairs. And Matthew, laden with parcels like a Father Christmas, burst noisily into the room, crying joyfully:

“I caught an earlier train, my darling, and here I am!”

CHAPTER XXIX

MATTHEW'S parcels dropped unheeded to his feet as he stood transfixed, staring at Paul and Allegra, who started apart at his entrance. But Allegra clung to Paul's arm; and so, still standing together, they faced Matthew.

Allegra was the first to speak. "You see?" she said. "You see, Matthew?" and there was almost a ring of relief in her voice.

Matthew, large and threatening, still wearing his Homburg hat, strode forward to the table.

"Let go that fellow's arm," he blustered, "and send him away before I kick him out of the room."

"Take off your hat, and don't make such a row in the presence of this lady," Paul said coolly. "I'm at your service anywhere else you like to mention, but we can't brawl here."

"Will you tell him to clear out?" Matthew said again to Allegra, ignoring Paul. "Will you tell that treacherous young hound to go?—or must I kick him downstairs?"

"Look here, Maythorne," Paul said pacifically, though he felt a dreadful, hysterical inclination to laugh, "you know very well you can't either fling me out of this room or kick me downstairs. You've reason to be angry, and I'll go peaceably the instant Miss Burford tells me to do so, but I'm not going for you."

Allegra

Maythorne turned to him furiously. "Hold your tongue. I'm not addressing you. For the last time, Allegra, will you tell him to go?"

"Please go, Paul," Allegra said quietly, and the hand that had clung to his arm was gently withdrawn. "There is a great deal I must say to Matthew quite by himself, so please go."

Paul came round the table close to Maythorne. "You have a real grievance," he said, "and I'm ready to afford you any explanation in my power. I'll meet you where you please, but you'll take off your hat in this room, or I'll do it for you."

"Get out!" Maythorne raged, "or I won't be responsible for your life, you damned, supercilious young dog, you!" And he took off his hat and flung it in Paul's face.

Paul caught it with one hand, laid it on the top of the pile of presents, and, picking his way through the scattered parcels, went out of the room, leaving the door just ajar. Had Allegra looked frightened he would not have left her. But to his astonishment she appeared quite fearless and even triumphant, the greatest possible contrast to the tearful, trembling girl of five minutes ago.

Maythorne's car was waiting in the street, and as Paul came out the chauffeur looked up from the copy of *London Opinion* he was reading, and touched his hat.

Paul started to walk up and down Paddington Street, a few yards behind the car, till Maythorne should come out.

His whole body was tingling with an ex-

Allegra

traordinary jumble of sensations. Joy that he had held his lady in his arms and kissed away her dear, salt tears. Yet even in the ecstasy of that moment he had been subconsciously aware that she let him do so, not because she loved him as he would have her love him; but because, just then, she had needed the sympathy he, alone, could give her.

Intense, vibrant annoyance that he should be forced to play the part of *tertium quid* in such a sorry drama.

Real pity for Maythorne, who was, he felt, badly used by both of them; and a strong, primitive desire both to batter and be battered by Maythorne till one of them should prove himself the better man.

It would be such a glorious chance to give free vent to the long-smothered sense of injury and scorn that had coloured all his relations with that popular author.

But, good heavens ! what an *esclandre* !

What a providential thing he had not locked that door, as Allegra bade him !

And all the time his ears were alert for the opening of the street door.

Allegra waited until the sound of Paul's retreating footsteps had died away. Then she said gently, "I was going to tell you to-day, in any case, that our engagement must be at an end, for I find that I do not love you enough to be your wife, Matthew."

"That," he answered bitterly, "is evident.

Allegra

But what cuts me to the heart is your perfidiousness. No sooner is my back turned than you carry on with that chap. It makes me feel that every time you pretended you must rest for your work, and wouldn't come out with me or let me come to see you, that you were with him—and I . . . shall go mad with the pain of it."

His voice broke, and he sank down on the mauve sofa and his hid face in his hands.

"You needn't feel that, Matthew," Allegra said, still with studied gentleness, "for it wouldn't be in the least true. I have never seen Paul Staniland since we were engaged until to-day."

"I don't see that that makes much difference if, when you do see him, you fall into his arms and . . ."

"It looks bad, I grant you, but it is not quite what you think. He found me very miserable, because I had decided to break with you—it's difficult to explain . . ."

"It is indeed," Matthew said grimly, "and I think you'd better not try to do it."

"I have no wish to explain anything," Allegra said haughtily, "except in so far as my explanations might make things a shade less painful for you. But if you don't wish it, there is no more to be said."

"Oh, but there is," Matthew exclaimed. "Your relations with that detestable young man are plain enough; but what I want to know is what *I* have done that you should have decided to break off your engagement to me, without ever having given me a hint of your intention. If ever a man

Allegra

in this world worshipped a woman, I have worshipped you. You filled all my heart and my mind; I've neglected my work, I've neglected my children, I've thought of nothing, waking or sleeping, but you and how to give you the smallest pleasure. I would have gone to any trouble and spent anything . . . Where have I failed? Tell me that."

"You haven't failed," Allegra faltered. "It is I who have failed. When I think of all you have done and all you have given me—when I think how generous you have been, and how kind, I am overcome with shame."

"So you ought to be. But . . . Allegra . . . if you are really sorry that you let that confounded fellow . . . if you acted mistakenly, on impulse, Allegra!"—Matthew started up, nearly upsetting the table as he did so—"I will forgive everything, and all shall be as it was before."

He came towards her with outstretched arms, and she, with an unmistakable look of terror and repulsion, backed away from him, right into the corner of the little room, crying, "No, Matthew, no! The only mistake I made was in ever thinking I could love you. Nothing can be as it was before, because it was all unreal and false on my part."

"False!" Matthew echoed. "It's evident you're false as Tecla pearls—I had real pearls for you there—" and he pointed to one of the parcels on the floor with a sob. "I thought you were pure as a pearl . . ."

"But I'm not," Allegra interrupted eagerly. "I'm not a bit like that. I'm selfish and cold—"

Allegra

"You didn't seem particularly cold with that young puppy just now, anyhow."

"Matthew, I am truly sorry; but if it had to come, it was better it should come now than later. You spoke just now of your children—I shouldn't have been a good mother to those dear children—I am far too much absorbed in my profession. I am not fit to love anyone. I don't suppose I shall ever marry . . ."

"If you suppose your latest fancy is going to marry you——"

"I'm not supposing it," Allegra said quite humbly. "I should probably be a worse wife for him than for you."

"Then what on earth *do* you want?"

"To be left alone," she said sadly; "to be left in peace to pursue my . . ." (she was going to say art, but stopped) "to pursue my profession."

"It's the ingratitude of it that is so incomprehensible—in him as well as you."

"What has *he* got to be grateful for?" she asked.

"Haven't I made him? Haven't I introduced him? Isn't he making a good income out of my play?"

"Your play!" Allegra repeated with real astonishment. "*Your* play?"

There was something in the tone of her voice that arrested Matthew's indignation. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Allegra shook her head. "There's no use going into all that," she said wearily. "I have read *Riches are Sorrow*."

"Well?"

Allegra

"Oh, Matthew, why do you force me to say it?"

"To say what? Nothing you can *say* can hurt me as much as what I have caught you doing. What do you mean?"

He advanced upon her, and Allegra flattened herself against the wall.

"You know there isn't an idea or a sentence in *Little St. Germain*s that originated in that book."

"I know nothing of the kind. But even if that were so, what difference does it make? Has Staniland been grumbling about that?"

"He has never said one word that could lead anybody to suppose the play wasn't entirely yours . . . that's why I was so angry with him."

"So angry with him!" Matthew repeated in a dazed sort of way. "You have a curious way of showing your anger. Were you angry with me when . . ."

"Please don't, Matthew. I know I have behaved disgracefully to you; but I am honest now, and if only you will go away . . ."

But Matthew had no intention of going away. He stormed and implored by turns for another fifteen minutes, and he refused to believe that Allegra knew her own mind. He only consented to go at last on her promising him that she would not see Paul for a week. That if after a week's reflection she was still of the same mind, he would take his dismissal, but up to that time he refused to believe that their engagement was at an end.

When he at last departed, Allegra remembered

Allegra

that he had given her no promise as to not trying to see her himself.

It was after five, and she felt as though she had been beaten with many stripes.

Paul waited till he saw Maythorne, unburdened by any parcels, come out, get into his car and drive off.

Then he went back to Allegra's door and rang the bell, praying that Amelia might answer it and not Mrs. Wingfield.

It was Amelia who opened the door.

"Has Miss Burford had tea?" Paul asked.

"No, sir, not yet; I've been waiting for her to ring."

"Well, take it up now, like a good girl, whether she rings or not."

"She always makes the tea herself up there, sir."

"You make it for her this afternoon; she's not very well. Will you?"

"I'll do it, and welcome, sir—without this."

"Don't ask her any questions, mind; be good to her, Amelia; I happen to know she's got a lot to worry her just now."

"All right, sir. Won't you go up, sir?"

"No, thanks; and I'll be grateful if you don't say I called . . . again. And hurry up that tea, won't you?"

"I'll take it up this minute, sir."

Paul picked up a taxi in the Marylebone Road and drove to Elm Tree Road.

When he opened the door in the garden wall

Allegra

Simon galumphed to meet him in joyous welcome, and Lucy, lying in a long chair on the lawn, waved her hand, exclaiming: "Where have you been? I hurried away without any tea because you said you'd be back, and I've been here over an hour."

Paul sat down on the grass beside her. "Before I tell you that, I want to know whether you are prepared to stand by your brother through the most infernally bad bit of country he has ever been in yet?"

"Of course I am. Go on. What has happened?"

"Child of my parents, sister of my soul!" he exclaimed dramatically, "I have just been having the very deuce of a row."

"What sort of a row? Do explain."

"The fat, my dear Lucy, is in the fire; and the smoke thereof will be seen for miles around."

"What fat? Oh, do talk sense."

"A large man, Lucy, in Harris tweeds you could smell a mile off, is going about London thirsting for your brother's blood."

Lucy swung her feet off the rest and sat up.

"Do you mean to say you've been quarrelling with that brute Maythorne?"

"Thou hast divined it."

"Where?"

"In Paddington Street."

"In the street! Oh, Paul!"

"No, not exactly in the street; in Allegra's rooms."

"Quarrelling with that man in Allegra's rooms! How horrid for her! But what were you doing there at all?"

Allegra

"I went to call. Upon my soul, Lucy, I went to pay a quiet, proper, formal call to tell Allegra you were up in town. But somehow it didn't turn out as formal as I had intended—and Maythorne came in in the middle—and there were excursions and alarms with a vengeance. And look here, you'll stand by Allegra too, won't you?"

"Paul," Lucy implored, "do be comprehensible. Why should all this happen because you called on Allegra? Though, mind you, feeling as you do, I think you would have done much better to keep away. What actually happened?"

"Nothing premeditated, I assure you. But I found Allegra awfully unhappy because she had decided to break off her engagement. I swear to you I had nothing to do with that. I have never so much as seen her since it happened till to-day. But you know how it is if someone you are fond of cries . . . and Maythorne came in right in the middle when I was trying to console her, and he was, quite naturally, awfully wrathy . . ."

"But if she had broken off her engagement, what right had he . . .?"

"That's the unfortunate part of it; she hadn't told him then——"

"But that was most unfair, most cruel," Lucy cried indignantly.

"It sounds so, I know; but somehow it wasn't so really. She only decided this morning that she couldn't marry him."

"Before she saw you, or after?"

"Before, long before. I had nothing to do with it. You really must believe that."

Allegra

Lucy looked grave. "I believe it if you tell me so seriously, of course. But I'm afraid you won't get other people to believe it . . . Least of all that poor Mr. Maythorne."

"Lucy!" cried Paul, seizing her by the arm, "if you call that man 'poor' once more, I will go forth and murder the first innocent person I meet; I swear I will. The streets of St. John's Wood will stream with gore. Allegra has been doing it all afternoon, and if you go on with it—I simply can't bear it."

"But I do think he has been shamefully used."

"So do I. But it wasn't anybody's fault."

"Oh, yes, it was. It was largely yours—if you had only kept away none of this would have happened."

"Well, I didn't keep away, so there's no use going back on that. What we've got to do now is to face the music and stand by Allegra."

"Is she engaged to you now?"

"Nothing of the kind. I only wish she was. But Maythorne may make things very difficult—he's so fond of the Press."

"Paul! You don't mean it will get into the papers?"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but you know the sort of thing. If he was a different sort of chap, I shouldn't care a damn; but being what he is, he might sacrifice her to save his own face."

"Oh, surely not! He couldn't be so mean."

"I hope not; but you never can tell with that sort of chap. You see, I can't possibly keep out of his way because he threatened all sorts of

Allegra

quaint things. All day long I must be within easy reach of him. I must be about his path and about his bed. . . .”

“How can you be about his bed? You *are* an idiot. . . .”

“It’s a figure of speech, my child, culled, as he would say, from the Scriptures. Anyway, whatever happens I must be forthcoming, wheresoever and howsoever and whensoever he desires to meet me in the rough-and-tumble.”

“But people don’t meet in the rough-and-tumble nowadays; it isn’t done—except in the House of Commons, and you’re neither of you there.”

“If we should happen to have a scrap, should you say he could wallop me?”

Lucy looked her brother over with an appraising eye. “You’re only about two-thirds his weight,” she said thoughtfully, “but you’re fairly hard—not so hard as you ought to be, though, by a long way. Yet I should think he’s a bit flabby, and he’s a lot older, which is horrid for you. . . . Whatever will people say?”

“The family must make up its mind to my being cut by all the relations. But it has its compensations. Think of it, Lucy! No more dull dinner-parties at the Staceys, with Uncle Edward talking about the Russian Ballet through his nose. No more weak tea in stuffy drawing-rooms with Great-aunt Eunice—she’ll think I’m dangerous as well as mad now. On the whole, it’s a restful prospect. Eh what?”

Lucy shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Quarrelling is always a pity—but I don’t for

Allegra

one moment believe that man really contemplates any violence."

"I fear not, too," Paul said sorrowfully. "It would have been such a rag."

As the front door was shut upon Matthew, Allegra sat down on the nearest chair, for her knees smote together and she felt rather faint.

She was utterly unused to "scenes" other than on the stage; as, except for an occasional scolding from her aunt, her life at Oxford, filled with innocent interests and enthusiasms, had been singularly safe and serene. Its main influence was one that wholly banished trivial frets and fusses, and she had carried with her into her theatrical life an unreadiness to take offence and an aloofness from gossip and intrigue that had, so far, kept her free from small worries or squabbles.

Her eyes fell on the four parcels lying on the floor—opulent-looking parcels in fair white paper with red seals and smart pink string. She gave a little cry of distress.

He had said something about pearls, and pearls were valuable. They must go back to him at once, and she was, oh, so tired!

Slowly she dragged herself from the chair, lifted and carried them into her bedroom, laying them on the bed. Then she went back and fetched the other things and flung them all into an empty suit-case.

She was only just in time. Someone had come into the sitting-room.

It was Amelia with tea.

Allegra

"I thought Mr. M'ythorne was 'ere, miss, and you never rang, that's why I didn't come before. I've made the tea, it's so late. You come and 'ave it, else you'll spoil your dinner."

She looked inquisitively at Allegra, but, faithful to her promise to Paul, she asked no questions; lingered a minute in the hope that Allegra might say something; but beyond a faintly-murmured "Thank you, Amelia," Allegra said nothing, and Amelia unwillingly departed, very curious indeed.

"White as death she is," she said to herself, as she went downstairs. "I'm afryde as he's been giving it to her something awful."

After tea, things looked perhaps a shade less hopeless. But for the first time since she came to Paddington Street she wished she didn't live alone.

She felt nervous.

She would write at once to Paul and tell him not on any account to come near her for a week, and she knew he would obey her.

But suppose Matthew came!

She felt absolutely certain Matthew would come: and there had been about Matthew that afternoon something primitive and terrifying.

Matthew was not one of the people who bear pain stoically. When he was hurt he made a good deal of noise about it, and she had hurt him cruelly.

Suppose he came every day?

Could she stand out against many other such interviews as that this afternoon?

Allegra

If he persisted in that policy of upbraiding and imploring by turns—could she be firm?

She had never been bullied in her life. Roughness of any kind intimidated her, and Matthew might be rough in more than speech if she unbearably provoked him.

She had wild thoughts of telegraphing to her aunt to come to her at once. But her aunt had just got a most comfortable post as caretaker, in one of Lord Dursley's large unoccupied country houses, with two servants under her.

It would be cruel to upset her aunt. Moreover, her aunt *would be certain to side with Matthew*.

She couldn't leave London, and short of telling Mrs. Wingfield and Amelia on no account to admit him, she saw no way by which she could avoid him.

Besides, he wouldn't take any notice of Mrs. Wingfield or Amelia. He would just push past them and come upstairs.

Either way it was a formidable prospect.

With trembling hands she wrote:

“DEAR PAUL,

“I have promised Matthew not to see you for a week. I feel I owe him that. He won't believe that I have broken off my engagement. I hoped this afternoon that, finding you with me like that, *he* would break it off—that's why I clung to you so—but he insists on forgiving me, and he would never have gone away if I hadn't promised. So please, please don't come near me. Oh, I am so tired and upset!

“ALLEGRA.”

Allegra

She addressed the four parcels to Matthew at Wellclose, and took them and the note to Paul to the nearest post-office. She registered the parcels, for she wasn't sure which contained the pearls. She thought it was the flat one, but couldn't be certain.

She would send the other things to-morrow, and perhaps that would make him believe she was in earnest.

That night, for the first time since she had played the part, she stumbled in her lines in a scene with Miss Duval, and entirely forgot to give that lady her cue.

It was in the second act, and Allegra, overcome with shame, felt that Matthew was having his just revenge.

She never quite knew how she got through the rest of the piece. She had eaten hardly anything all day, and nearly fainted when she reached her dressing-room at the end.

As her dresser was trying to bring her round, Miss Duval came in: "She's completely done up. Fetch me the sal volatile on my dressing-table. I'll look after her."

When the woman returned she gave Allegra a stiff dose that made her gasp.

After the dresser had got Allegra into her clothes, Miss Duval sent her away.

"Now," she said, "what in the world has happened? What has upset you so?"

Allegra clung to her, whispering, "I'm frightened."

Miss Duval laughed. "I suppose Maythorne

Allegra

refuses to take his dismissal? Well, I'm not surprised. You see, *he* isn't a fish."

"I only wish he was," Allegra sighed. "I'd much rather have to do with fishes than bulls, when I'm all by myself."

"You oughtn't to be by yourself just now, or at any time, at your age, you poor little silly. Can't you chum with another girl?"

"Not all in a minute, and it's this dreadful week I've got to get through. He won't believe I mean what I say, and insists that I must think it over for a week . . . and I know he'll come and argue and argue, and . . . I'm terrified."

Miss Duval thought hard for a minute.

"You'd better come to me," she said. "I've got a spare bedroom."

"Oh, will you really have me? Will you let me come now—to-night?"

"What about the people at your rooms? Wouldn't they think it very odd if you don't come back at all to-night?—especially as I gather Maythorne has been there constantly——"

"And Paul," Allegra added.

Miss Duval raised her fine eyebrows. "Well, all the more reason to consider appearances."

"I'm frightened," Allegra persisted.

"Are they on the telephone?"

"No."

"Hang it all, I don't know what's to be done. I'd come with you, but, of course, it's a miserable little bed, and we *must* both be able to sleep, else we'll be good for nothing to-morrow . . . and two shows."

Allegra

Allegra flung her arms round Miss Duval's neck. "If you'll take me with you to-night," she exclaimed, "I don't care what Mrs. Wingfield thinks, and I'll sleep on the floor, or anywhere."

"Righto! Bring a toothbrush, if you've got one here. I can give you anything else. We'll send them a note first thing in the morning, and I'll come with you to collect your things."

"*You are an angel,*" Allegra breathed in prayerful thanksgiving.

"So you think to-night, for you're thoroughly rattled. By the end of the week you'll probably think me a devil. Upon my word, though, Maythorne is more of a man than I thought him. Come along."

CHAPTER XXX

MAYTHORNE was undoubtedly a much-tried man. Not only was he head-over-ears in love, but he had grown accustomed to see himself in the limelight as a sort of King Cophetua. And whoever heard of the beggar-maid rounding on the King in this outrageous fashion? Besides, he was disquieted by what Allegra had said about the play.

What had she meant exactly when she said that about there not being an idea or a sentence in *Little St. Germains* that originated in his book?

And then she spoke of being angry with Staniland because he *hadn't* claimed the play.

A pretty state of things if well-paid "secretaries" were to go clamouring for public recognition of their paltry suggestions!

So far, he owned, Staniland had had the good sense not to claim anything of the kind. But what would happen now?

If Allegra went about saying that the play was Staniland's . . . whether people believed her or not, such rumours were detrimental to a popular author's reputation. He wished now he had not been quite so violent with the insufferable Staniland. For a few minutes he had completely lost his self-control, and that was always a mistake.

Even if Allegra came to her senses, there was Staniland to be reckoned with; and a Staniland

Allegra

in love with Allegra was not likely to be placated by a renewal of her engagement to him, Matthew.

Now he came to think of it, Staniland had never been really cordial. There was always something stand-off and chilly in his manner. Matthew cursed him for a snob: and yet he could be friendly enough to people with no social status. Look at him with Black or that little interfering chap, Vyne! Look at him with Rebecca Starr! They were incomprehensible, these toffs; you never knew where to have them.

He didn't look like a chap, either, who'd take a thrashing, and as to fighting . . .

In the genteel circles in which Matthew had been brought up fighting was then looked upon as low, very low. But since his rise in the social scale he had learnt that boys of Staniland's class were taught to box, actually brought up to knock each other about, and doubtless Staniland knew how to use his fists.

Fighting was out of the question. It was undignified, outrageous. He would refuse to do anything of the kind. If Staniland attacked him, he would seek protection from the Law. He would not be forced into a vulgar brawl by fifty Stanilands. If the pen, as Matthew frequently observed in his novels, was mightier than the sword, it was infinitely more powerful and certainly preferable to the naked fist. It was impossible that he could ever take Staniland's hand in the way of friendship again; but he would not —no, he would *not*—allow any quarrel to be fastened upon him. His was the grievance. He

Allegra

had been shamefully, cruelly treated, but for the sake of his children he would allow no scandal. He had a position to maintain. Millions of readers looked to him to uphold the best traditions of English morality. He had even waived some of his prejudices in getting engaged to an actress—but he was one of those who had always maintained that a life upon the stage *might* be as pure as any other life. . . .

Backwards and forwards, like a shuttlecock between two experts at Badminton, went Matthew's thoughts as he drove out to Wellclose. They would not expect him. He had telegraphed to Becky that morning that he would sleep at his flat in the Adelphi . . . but he was shaken and miserable. He wanted his home and his little girls. Allegra was quite right when she credited him with well-developed domestic tendencies. He was hurt, hurt deeply in his heart, which was really quite kind and soft.

He had been so good to her. He had spent himself in thinking of things to please her. And she *had* been pleased till that viper came between them.

At the thought of the viper Matthew forgot all his nobly pacific resolutions of a few minutes before, and swore so violently that the chauffeur slowed up, thinking his master must have spoken to him.

When Allegra fetched her letters and her clothes from Paddington Street next day, she found a note from Paul:

Allegra

"MY DEAR ALLEGRA,

"Of course I won't 'come near you' since you wish me to keep away; though I think it's a horrid bore, and a whole week is an eternity. But what I want to know is this—does Lucy come under the ban? I really called yesterday to tell you she is up here with me till Monday, when my father comes up and she joins him at Claridge's for the Horse Show. She is showing Columbine on Tuesday afternoon. I enclose you a couple of tickets, in case you care to look in. They're right on the opposite side of Olympia from ours, but are the best I could get, for the place is practically sold out; but I think you ought to be able to see the jumping all right.

"If Lucy may call on Sunday afternoon, or if you will lunch with her on Monday at her club in Grosvenor Street, she'd love it. Just let her know. I cannot tell you how sorry I am that, quite unintentionally, I let you in for such a scene yesterday. Please rest all you can, and forget it.

"Yours,
"PAUL."

Miss Duval did not go with her, after all; for Allegra, after a good night's rest, woke at her usual time, had breakfast luxuriously in bed, and was dressed and out of the house before Miss Duval had rung her bell at all. In fact, when Allegra got back with the things she wanted, the maid told her Miss Duval had just started her breakfast.

It was a lovely morning, and youth and health

Allegra

had restored Allegra's self-confidence. Her tremors of the night before now seemed silly, and she was rather sorry she had bothered Miss Duval.

Matthew no longer loomed so large and terrifying, but all the same she felt glad to be away from her own rooms. If he came to see her here it would be easier to be calm and dignified. He simply couldn't shout in Miss Duval's flat. There was no question that Miss Duval's presence was a tower of strength.

She had made a virtuous resolve that on no account would she be a nuisance, so she made no attempt to see her hostess before she went out, but left a message with the parlourmaid that she had gone to Paddington Street. She refrained from going to Miss Duval's room when she got back, and didn't see her till nearly one o'clock, when Miss Duval appeared dressed for the street —striking, splendid, and expensive-looking.

"Martin gave me your message," she said as she came in, "so I didn't hurry. How frightfully strenuous you are. What made you get up so early?"

"I slept splendidly and felt as fresh as possible, so I thought I'd go at once. There was no need to drag you there."

"Well, I wasn't sorry, for *I* feel anything but fresh. Don't expect to see me in the mornings ever. I'm not at my best then. I never turn up till lunch-time, and I'm never in for that except on matinée days. Next week happens to be very full, so make your own arrangements and do exactly as you like. There will always be meals

Allegra

here for you if you want them, and the flat is at your disposal."

"You're ever so good," Allegra murmured meekly, feeling a little chilled.

"I've promised to motor down to Brighton tomorrow," Miss Duval continued, "and I'm afraid I can't take you, as the party's made up. What will you do?"

"Would you allow me to have a girl to tea here?"

"A dozen girls if you like—but why a girl?"

"It's Mr. Staniland's sister," Allegra explained shyly. "Here's his letter about it." And she held out Paul's note to Miss Duval.

Miss Duval read it and laughed. "You were a donkey to give that promise," she said. "But by all means have this Lucy—what a prim name!—if you like. Perhaps it's as well I should be away."

"I'm sorry," Allegra said simply. "She would love to have seen you. She admires you so much. I suppose you couldn't come for an hour or two to the Horse Show on Tuesday?"

"Where are the seats?" asked the practical Miss Duval.

Allegra showed her the tickets.

"I'll try. I haven't been for years, and thought it an awful bore when I did go; but we'll look in and see this friend of yours ride. Come along and have lunch. You, at all events, must be hungry."

That was a long, long week for Allegra.

She was far more lonely than she had ever

Allegra

been in Paddington Street, even on the first night of *Little St. Germain*s. She felt in the way and out of the picture, and her serene self-confidence was almost shattered several times a day.

Miss Duval was never actually unkind, but she was scornful, and it was such a new and painful sensation for Allegra to know that she was considered a fool, that she grew nervous and diffident.

Rosa Rendal had been out-spoken enough; but through all Rosa's chaff, and even occasional scoldings, there had shone the strong, steady light of a genuinely admirative affection.

There was certainly small affection and even less admiration behind Miss Duval's easy derision, and complete inability to understand Allegra's character. She could not, for instance, credit that the girl was really suffering because of the unmerited pain she had caused and would cause Matthew Maythorne to bear.

"Now I," Miss Duval announced cheerfully, "rather enjoy having a man crazy about me—especially if I don't care two pins about him. You may depend, my dear, he'll get over it quite soon."

She was contemptuous of Allegra's eagerness to return his presents as soon as possible, and suggested that, not knowing her own mind when she accepted him, it was quite possible that she didn't know her own mind now that she thought she didn't want him.

And there were other difficulties.

A great many visitors came to the flat in the afternoon, most of them men; some of them men

theatrical matters. Cer-
sed to make themselves
the pretty young actress
quite as charming off the
of any age are proof against
ight young eyes, especially
charm and intelligence. In
concerning the theatre Alle-
not conceal her keen interest.
nt that even as—Miss Duval
become unduly prominent in
so in Miss Duval's own draw-
ed a magnet withdrawing atten-
stess—and Miss Duval did not

time it happened Allegra realised
wards was nervously uncertain as
ss Duval wished her to be present
ions or not. If she stayed in her
ss Duval said she moped. If she
ss Duval complained that she saw
her, and if she came in, as bidden, to
u, and people hovered round the tea-
drop in the temperature afterwards was
ptible.

was a long week.

ame to tea on Sunday, and was natural, and delightful. Allegra, in thinking over afterwards, was quite unable to determine Lucy knew why she was staying with ual or not. Lucy never catechised peo- d consequently Allegra longed to tell her ole tangle, and bask in the warmth of sym-

Allegra

pathy she knew she would receive. But Lucy gave her no opening, and she was too shy to force one for herself.

Save for Lucy's visit, she was alone the whole of Sunday. On Monday came the first batch of visitors in the afternoon, and Allegra realised her mistake. On Tuesday Miss Duval went with her to the Horse Show, and they saw Lucy take Columbine round the ring, and Columbine received a second prize. To Allegra it was a thrilling but by no means pleasant experience, for she was wholly unused to horses, and Columbine's antics, excited by the band, the people, and the applause, filled her with sheer terror for Lucy. Columbine lived up to her name, for she picked up her feet as daintily, and reared and flung her heels about as lavishly, as any *première danseuse*. Yet Lucy seemed quite composed, and was never so much as shaken in the saddle.

Broad-shouldered and slim-waisted, her steady eyes looking straight between Columbine's ominously forward-tilted ears, she seemed but the crest of the wind-blown wave she rode; and the fresh colour in Lucy's cheeks was hardly a shade deepened as she trotted out of the ring.

Miss Duval was pleased with the Show. The people were smart and yet curiously different from the typical smart crowd in a theatre. Right across the ring Allegra saw Paul and his father, and presently Lucy joined them. She knew Paul saw her, for they were both long-sighted. But he made no sign, and at four o'clock Miss Duval bore her away, for people were coming to tea.

Allegra

On Wednesday morning Matthew came to see her. She had left her address with Mrs. Wingfield. He had called at Paddington Street, and was told she was staying with Miss Duval for a week.

In spite of the various parcels that had arrived in annoying numbers at Wellclose, to be carried away by Matthew in gloomy silence and disappear entirely, he had as yet given no hint to anyone of Allegra's broken faith.

As he was not usually in the least secretive about his purchases, Becky and the children were much puzzled, for surely it was too early to be buying Christmas presents, and no birthday was immediately toward. Somehow the children seemed to realise that they must not question their father about these mysterious parcels. He was short-tempered and strange since his return from his successful tour. At times he was unusually demonstrative in his affection, but he was also strangely unwilling to answer questions. Instead of being enthusiastically ready to talk about "the Allegra lady," as the little girls called their father's future wife, he was grumpy and uncommunicative. Becky Starr observed everything with her bright black eyes, and bade the little girls be careful not to worry their Daddy. She suspected all was not well, but asked no questions, not even why Allegra did not come on Sunday as arranged.

He went into town on Monday and called at Allegra's rooms, to be told by Amelia that Miss Burford had gone off quite sudden-like to stay

Allegra

with a lady at the theatre. Miss Duval it was, and Mrs. Wingfield had the address.

Amelia flew to obtain it for him, and Mrs. Wingfield herself came to the door to give it. Mrs. Wingfield and Amelia were both of them devoured by curiosity.

Matthew copied the address into his pocket-book, and drove away in his car.

He decided he would not try to see Allegra that day. Give her a little longer to think things over, and perhaps she would begin to realise all she was giving up. She would begin to see that such a man (here he gave his moustache the upward twist so significant with him of a certain train of thought) did not come in a girl's way every day in the week. Surely, on reflection, she would see that he offered her a great deal, and that he himself was by no means the most negligible portion of the offering. He wrote to her that night, a thoughtful, temperate letter, that he hoped she would show to Miss Duval.

He was annoyed when he heard she had gone to stay with Miss Duval. He still persisted in looking upon Allegra as his future wife, and he had no wish, in fact he positively disliked the idea, that she should be in any way intimate with Miss Duval. He knew, or thought he knew, a great deal about Miss Duval. He was a man of the world, it was all right for him to know her, but it was foolish of Allegra. She really had no business to do such a thing without first consulting him. But it was impossible to wait a week before seeing her, so there was nothing for it but to

Allegra

go to Miss Duval's flat, ask for her, enlist her sympathies, and then see Allegra—alone.

How much had Allegra told Miss Duval? Oh, these dear women! how indiscreet they were. He waited until Wednesday morning, but he wrote every day to Basil Street.

Miss Duval was not at home when Matthew arrived (which meant she was not yet dressed), but Miss Burford was in, and Matthew was duly shown into the drawing-room, where Miss Burford was reading the typescript of a play that an aspiring dramatist had sent to Miss Duval, in the hope that she might "see herself" in it.

Matthew looked subdued. As the day promised to be hot, he had discarded the Harris tweeds for a dark grey flannel suit, so he didn't look quite as big as usual.

Allegra rose when he was announced. He held out his hand, and she gave him hers for but a second, withdrawing it before he could really clasp it.

"I have spent," he said mournfully, "a dreadful week-end. I have suffered, Allegra, suffered cruelly, and I come . . ."

"I have been very unhappy, too," Allegra interrupted. "*You* have nothing to reproach yourself with, so it is really worse for me."

She spoke in appropriately dejected tones, and her eyes were bent on the excellent grey velvet-pile carpet, with its border of pale blurred roses. Her eyelashes were distractingly long, and there was the most delicate faint colour in her cheeks.

Yes: her appearance belied her melancholy voice.

Allegra

"You realise, then, how badly you have treated me?"

"I do. I have already acknowledged it. Therefore, don't you think it would be much better that we should not meet any more for the present? We can only pain each other. The best thing you can possibly do is to forget me as soon as possible."

"You, I suppose, would find it easy to forget me?"

"No, I don't think so. I think my heart will always ache and my conscience reproach me when . . ."

"Your conscience!" Matthew repeated. "You can't possess one, or you would never have behaved as you did . . . but I have not come here to reproach you . . . I have come to plead . . ."

"Oh, please, don't!" Allegra besought him earnestly. "It's no use. I can't make myself care as you want me to care, as I ought to care. . . . I truly can't."

There was silence for perhaps a minute, and Allegra reflected that, after all, it was much easier here. Matthew could not shout in Miss Duval's drawing-room. And, as if divining her thought, he asked suddenly:

"Why are you here?"

"I . . . I'm staying with Miss Duval."

"So I perceive: but why?"

"She . . . very kindly asked me."

"I think"—Matthew's voice was commendably low—"that you make a great mistake in staying here."

"That surely is a matter for me to decide."

Allegra

"No," he said, still speaking with studied moderation. "Not quite. You are young and ignorant . . . and although you are so recklessly trying to break the tie that binds us, I shall take the liberty of warning you when I think you are in danger. . . ."

"Matthew!" Allegra interrupted indignantly. "Will you have the goodness to remember that I am Miss Duval's guest, and that you are in her house?"

"Will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Certainly not, when you so far forget yourself . . . and are so disloyal and odious and impossible."

That word was fatal, for it was a word Matthew had heard Paul use. Unconsciously he raised his voice: "Has that fellow been here?"

"I don't understand you."

"You do—you are prevaricating. *Has* that fellow Staniland been here?"

"I promised you I wouldn't see him for a week. I don't break my word."

"Have you written to him?"

"I wrote to him to tell him of my promise, and of course he has not come, when I told him not to."

"Has he dared to write to you?"

"He answered my note to him."

"Did he make love to you?"

"That," said Allegra, "is a matter between Mr. Staniland and me, and does not concern you."

"Allegra"—poor Matthew was nearly in tears—"tell me . . . you aren't going to marry him, are you? Promise me."

"I can promise nothing," Allegra said firmly,

Allegra

"but I have no intention of marrying anybody for ages. I have something else to do."

"Do you realise what it meant to me when you sent back all my poor gifts?"

"I do. I hated doing it. It hurt me—Matthew, believe me—even more than it hurt you; but it had to be. I got all your letters this week, but I didn't answer, because there was nothing that I could say that was kind or comforting. The only thing is for us not to see each other. Then, perhaps, we may both forget—you, that you cared for someone wholly unworthy of your love; I, that I did not care enough, and so injured one who only sought to do all that was kind and good to me."

Allegra rose. Matthew sat still bowed forward in his chair.

"You mean it, then?" he asked.

"I do mean it. I am sorry, but this time I know my own mind. I shall make no more mistakes."

"When you have taken a man's life in your hands and broken it across and shattered his belief in woman, you call it 'a mistake'?"

"You have your children to live for."

"And my Art," Matthew added solemnly. "You forget that. *That* will be embittered. I can no longer hope to write the sunny, optimistic books I have written hitherto. . . ."

Allegra made no reply; her face was averted; she crossed the room swiftly. She had reached the door before he realised what she was doing. She opened it, pausing on the threshold to say:

Allegra

"Good-bye, Matthew. If you can bring yourself to forgive me, I shall be very grateful—but please don't try to see me again for a long, long time."

"Stop, Allegra. I have at least the right to know this: Have you told anyone that our engagement is broken off?"

"I have told everybody I could think of," Allegra declared mendaciously, "and that it is entirely my fault."

At that Maythorne left the room and the house.

That night a paragraph was sent to the Press Association—that "the marriage arranged between Mr. Matthew Maythorne, the eminent novelist, and Miss Allegra Burford will not take place."

CHAPTER XXXI

DURING the rest of the summer Allegra saw a great deal of Paul. More and more did she find herself dependent on his friendship and sympathy. She loved to have him with her. She appreciated the kindness and tenderness that permeated all their relations with each other. She knew that he loved her as she desired to be loved—but she refused to promise him anything.

Her brief engagement had taught her self-distrust. She knew now that she was liable to make mistakes; that she was capable of sudden strong emotion that was fugitive as, at the time, it was overpowering. And she was firmly determined that never again would she follow any will-o'-the-wisp of the sort.

Before she promised to marry anyone, she would make uncommonly sure that what she felt was something that would last. She had suffered a good deal both at the time and since the breaking of her engagement to Matthew Maythorne; and perhaps she minded most the general impression which was mysteriously prevalent that she was "awfully clever." That she had used Matthew Maythorne and his play as stepping-stones in her artistic career, and, having achieved the goal in view, she had no further use for the man who had been so ready to serve her.

Now, although it is considered commendable by the average moralist to make stepping-stones

Allegra

of one's "dead self," it is not thought praiseworthy to make a like use of other people. And the supposition that she had so used Matthew Maythorne was particularly bitter to Allegra. Such conduct savoured to her of a calculating meanness, accompanied by the sort of shrewd commercialism that she most despised. It was little short of torture to her to be credited with qualities of the kind. It seemed to besmirch the banner of her Art, which hitherto she had kept so clean and carried so proudly. Moreover, the less reputable Press did not spare her. In the "gossip" columns of certain papers inspired paragraphs appeared "wondering whether" this or that was the reason of the rupture of the engagement between a certain celebrated novelist and a "clever young actress *not* in musical comedy." And the clever young actress was chaffingly accused of almost everything short of bigamy.

Matthew never happened to come across Paul during June, and in July he removed his household to a lodge in Inverness-shire. The gossip columns, in all the papers possessing them, now informed a listening world that Mr. Maythorne had fled from the madding crowd, was finishing his novel, and entertaining parties of his friends. Then followed snapshots of Matthew armed with creel, rod and landing-net.

People were sure that girl must have done something dreadful, or he would never have broken off his engagement.

Such a healthy-minded, good-hearted man.
He was quite right to consider his children.

Allegra

It was not likely she'd get such a chance again. All the same, for the people who saw Allegra in *Little St. Germains*, there was an added thrill in the charm of her performance. "You'd never think it—would you?—to look at her?"

Little St. Germains continued to run with undiminished success right up to August, when Appleton's lease of the Congreve expired. So excellent was the booking that he took another theatre, and determined to open with it again in September.

Allegra was allowed to take a fortnight's holiday. The first half of it she spent, by Lord Dursley's invitation, with her aunt in his then unoccupied Wiltshire house. For the second week she went to the Stanilands. Paul, backed up by Lucy, had persuaded their mother to invite her. He made no secret of his feelings to his people, but was equally frank in his declaration that Allegra refused to be bound in any way.

It was a new and bewildering experience for Allegra. She had never stayed as guest in a big country house before. She admired immensely the beautiful old Manor House and the gracious Garsetshire country. She loved the many dogs, feared and mistrusted the horses, appreciated and was grateful for the kindness of her welcome and the friendliness of the family and guests. But in some queer way she felt outside it all. The constant coming and going, the innumerable plans for sending to meet and dispatch people to the distant station, the constant, unavoidable references to people she had never heard of, the

Allegra

arrangements for each day, with its choice of things to do for several sets of guests—most of them of strongly-marked sporting tastes. She wondered how Lucy and her mother ever kept their reason.

She was so used to one well-defined aim, to one absorbing topic of conversation, that it seemed to her incredible that people could be really interested in so many and diverging activities. Yet they certainly all seemed keen enough.

She played no game except hockey, and that she had never played since she left school; consequently she saw very little of Paul except in a crowd. He seemed to be always playing lawn tennis, or riding, or helping with village cricket matches. She was both perplexed and piqued by Paul's apparent indifference to her society. Allegra was never forced to do anything she disliked, neither was she ever allowed to feel neglected or left out of things; but all the same she did feel out of it in a way she would hardly have believed possible in such entirely kind and friendly surroundings.

When she had been at Corse Abdale for six days, she began to long for the theatre with a homesick yearning. *That* life was real life for her; all this seemed shadowy, confusing, and fruitless.

She felt a real affection for the Squire and Lucy; admired and was rather afraid of Mrs. Staniland; and Paul—

What did she really feel about Paul?

She certainly cared for him. She loved to be with him. She grudged him to these other people

Allegra

and to all these dreadfully absorbing animals and sports.

But deep in her heart she knew that there existed something that she cared for more than for Paul. Something that called to her when she was alone with a voice that was full of authority.

On the last evening of her stay they danced in the hall—just the house-party, reinforced by some neighbours; about a dozen couples in all.

It was a hot night, and she and Paul wandered out into the garden, sweet with the scent of long borders of Nicotiana that shone star-like and luminous in the moonlight.

Paul led her away from the house into the rose-garden between tall pergolas of ramblers whose foliage made sharp black shadows on the path. In the deepest shadow he stopped.

Dancing with Allegra made him lose his head, and he did what he had fully determined not to do—he took her in his arms and kissed her.

She did not resist. She rested in his arms very still and seemingly quite happy. But presently she drew herself away and went out into the moonlight, gently pulling him after her by the hands he still held.

“Look at me, Paul,” she said.

Paul needed no second telling. Hadn’t he been looking at her all night with unspeakable longing?

She drew her hands out of his and placed them on his shoulders.

“It’s no use, my dear,” she said sadly; “you would never be content to come second, and, just now, there is something that comes a long way first with me.”

Allegra

"I wonder," Paul said rather piteously, "if *anything* will ever happen that will seem more important to you than the theatre."

"I don't know," Allegra answered. "At present I can't conceive of anything—but I can't tell. I've changed so much in other ways in the last five years—never in that. But even that may change in me some day—but it won't be for a long time yet. I must travel on the road that is plainest, and that way seems clearly marked out for me."

"Don't you care for me at all?" Paul asked.

"I care for you a lot: more than I care for any human creature. You can, and do, give me what I want more than anyone else in the world—protection, tenderness, understanding, delicious fun, and the best and dearest company. All this you give me. But I can only give you so little in comparison that I'm not going to take your gifts. I can't give you anything at all adequate in return . . . as yet."

"As yet!" Paul echoed. "Do you mean that some day you think you might be able to give me . . . what I want?"

"Perhaps; I don't know. I can't be sure. One thing I do know is that I couldn't live your life here, not for a month."

"You mean you hate the way we live, you hate the country? You don't like my people?"

"I love your country and your people, but I couldn't live their life. You remember in *Vanity Fair* (that's one of the novels I have read)—how Becky Sharp at Queen's Crawley thinks, 'I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year'?"

Allegra

"I'm afraid you'd never have anything like that if you married me," Paul interrupted.

"Wait—what I was going to say was that I couldn't be a good woman with fifty thousand a year, if I had to live the sort of life Becky goes on to describe. And as to living like Lucy or your mother, the very thought of all they have to arrange and get through in any day of their lives simply terrifies me. I couldn't do it, Paul; I should fail hopelessly."

"You would never have to do it."

"Perhaps not in so large a way, but it would be the same thing in miniature, and . . . it wouldn't interest me."

"If you loved me . . . surely you'd be a little interested in my things . . . I care so much for yours."

"I *am* interested, vitally interested in your work and in you . . . but, frankly, I'm more interested in my own work than in anything or anybody in the world. I daresay it's horrid of me. I daresay that some day I shall wake up and see things in their right proportions, but just now . . . I simply can't."

Paul lifted her hands from his shoulders, held them a minute, and then kissed them. Still holding them, he looked into her eyes.

"You always make me think," he said, "of that dialogue in Lucian between Cupid and his mother—do you remember?"

She shook her head.

"Where Venus asks him why he never shoots at the Muses; and he tells her that they are one

Allegra

and all so absorbed in their several arts, so fine and strong and aloof, that when he saw them he ‘unbent his bow, shut his quiver, and extinguished his torch, in fear lest he might do them any hurt.’”

“I like that,” she said softly. “You *are* a dear, you know; you understand so well. I couldn’t get on without you—even if you marry someone else I shall still want to see you sometimes. You’ll let me, won’t you?”

“We’ll discuss that when I *have* married somebody else.”

“And if I married? Even then, I should still want to see you.”

“That also is possible. But I shouldn’t dare to come.”

“Why?”

“Well—you see, Cupid is not at all respectful to me.”

“You mean you are susceptible?” she asked anxiously; “that you think it’s quite likely you’ll marry somebody?”

Paul laughed, and kissed her again.

“I’m a patient fellow,” he said, “and persevering.”

“I believe you are,” she answered in a contented voice. “And they are qualities I greatly respect. Now we must go back and dance with other people.”

THE END



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